

THE SYMBIOSIS OF IMAGE, MONUMENT AND  
LANDSCAPE: A STUDY OF SELECT GODDESS  
IMAGES AT PRASAT KRAVAN, KBAL SPEAN  
AND BANTEAY SREI IN CAMBODIA

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OF SELECT GODDESS IMAGES AT PRASAT KRAVAN, KBAL SPEAN AND  
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This dissertation examines the significance of the feminine in ancient Cambodian (Khmer) art focusing on three specific sites dated to the Angkor period (9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century). Despite the plethora of images and epigraphic references that indicate a critical role for the feminine, most narratives based on the primary sources are centered around the masculine aspects of Khmer history and culture. This predisposition that had its beginnings in the colonial period continues to be perpetuated even in more recent scholarship. The images, monuments, inscriptions, myths and performance traditions examined in this dissertation, and the role of the devotee in interacting with them, poses a challenge to the pre-existing biases against the feminine in Khmer art.

Rather than looking at source materials as isolable units, this dissertation explores the possibility that sources such as images, monuments, landscape, myth and performance practices have fluid boundaries, informing and connecting with each other, profoundly influencing our understanding about the significance of the feminine. Subsequently, categories such as political, economic and performative need not necessarily be placed in a hierarchical order nor be isolated from each other as they are in some extant literature. Furthermore, this study also examines sources as being more than mere symbols, rather embodying the actual political and cultural processes of the time. For example, vi-

sual depictions, inscribing on temple walls and the manipulation of landscape to interact with built forms could be perceived as encapsulating performative moments. Cultural expressions are therefore at the heart of the political and economic machinery of the kingdom.

Images like the Mahalakshmi, Siva, Mahishasuramardini, Vishnu, Lakshmi and Ananta at the three sites likely embodied both Hindu and local sacred entities. These particular representations in their specific locations, along with inscriptions, localized Tantric beliefs, autochthonous myths and performance practices conjointly indicate the critical importance of the feminine to kingship, territorial might, economic and spiritual well-being of the kingdom, elucidated also through a haptic experience of religious sites and imagery. Through an alternative approach to the study of Khmer source materials, this dissertation suggests that the feminine was a powerful presence in Khmer art.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Soumya James was born on October 14, 1973 in Madras, India. She received her B.A. in History from Stella Maris College (Madras), M.A. in History from Madras Christian College (Madras) and her M.Phil. from Central University (Hyderabad). From 1998–2001, she worked as a freelance writer, publishing articles for a book, newspapers and magazines. During this time, she also worked as a middle and high school teacher at The School – Krishnamurti Foundation India (Madras) and later as a copyeditor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies (Madras).

In 2001, she joined the Department of History of Art and Visual Studies, Cornell University as a graduate student from where she earned her M.A. in May 2005. From June 2005 until February 2006, she carried out her dissertation fieldwork in South India, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

To my father, Josef James

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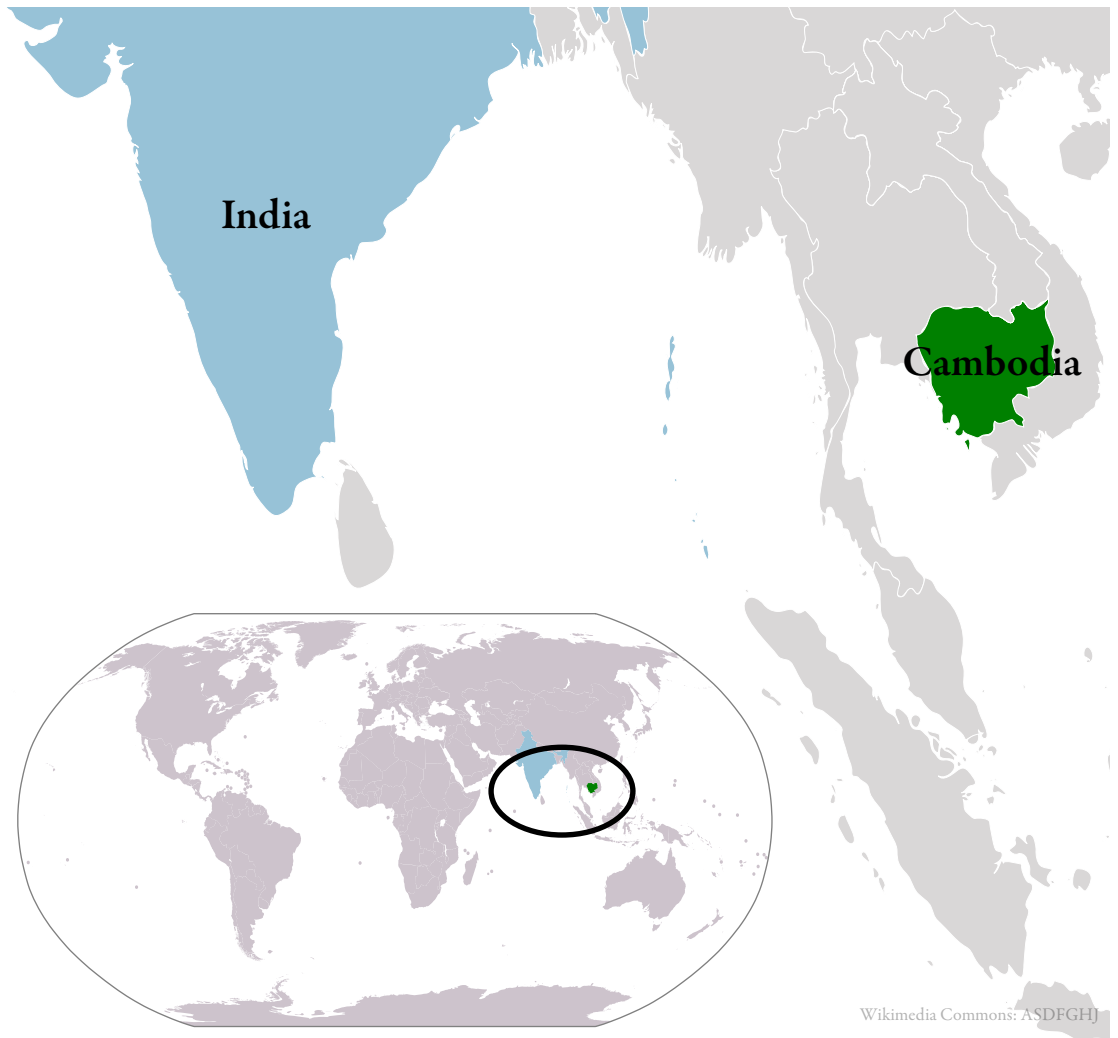
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The question at the center of this dissertation is the following: what is the role of the divine feminine<sup>1</sup> in Khmer art? This is not, of course, an entirely original question. Many researchers and scholars over the years have attempted to answer this question in many different ways. But several aspects of the question remain unanswered and some explanations unsatisfactory, and one reason for these shortcomings could relate to the way in which source materials are approached. The first attempt at putting together different sources to compile Khmer history was made during Cambodia's colonial period. Khmer historiography was officially composed during the colonial period that commenced in 1863. The historiographical narrative was compiled by an eclectic group of writers that included historians, government employees, travelers, architects, novelists and scholars interested in foreign cultures. One of the mechanisms of research employed by the colonial scholars to study Khmer art and architecture was to reduce the monuments, sites and images to a collection of blueprints, diagrams, maps and measurements with the aim of conducting a "scientific" and "rational" study of the subjects on hand. While this approach was no doubt essential for the numerous restoration projects undertaken by the colonialists, it also precluded them from recognizing that these various elements (monument, images, landscape, and indeed, the devotee) could have been symbiotically connected to each other<sup>2</sup>. The failure to acknowledge this relationship, one which is apparent in the primary sources, is a considerable drawback in colonial histo-

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<sup>1</sup>I define "divine feminine" as the female divine energy that is personified as a goddess in myth, art and as abstract objects such as elements of the natural world.

<sup>2</sup>Kaja McGowan (2008, p. 245) rightly points out that art historians trained in Western sensibilities tend to focus their attention on monumental stone icons, usually anthropomorphic

riography. Recognizing this link between the animate and inanimate realms is imperative in order to gain a deeper understanding of Khmer religion and art.

Depending on the academic or philosophical predilections of the writers, certain elements were accorded an elevated status over the others. Consequently, we observe the emergence of two discordant narratives, one that was present in primary sources and the other, the colonial scholarship that was compiled based on these sources. One common aspect in nearly all the colonial compilations was the peripheral position (if at all) accorded to the feminine in art. Khmer art (and history) was largely composed in masculine terms by these writers. This hierarchy, conferring an inferior status to the feminine in academic writing, appeared to mirror the negative perception of local women evidenced in non-academic literature, also written by Western authors. Women and the feminine were often associated with the erotic and were termed vulgar and decadent. Consequently, women and women's bodies were never associated with political, economic or spiritual power. These qualities were solely reserved for the masculine. The reasons for these biases can be attributed to political and moralistic ideologies that had its beginnings well before the colonial period itself. Smith (1999, pp. 32) points out although notions of "otherness" (which drew comparisons with someone or something who existed on outside of one's field of experience or knowledge, like the "Orient") had existed for a while, it was during the period of Enlightenment that such views became "formalized" through philosophy, science and imperialism. Said (1979, pp. 2–3) argued that political accounts, novels, theories and social descriptions were some of the ways in which the colonizers established their control and power but this shortcoming can lead many scholars to overlook, for example, raw ingredients in the landscape (or landscape itself) "that hold meaning as sheer potential".



over their colonies. Cohn (1996) and Mitter (1992, p. xiv) added that knowledge about the colonies was one of the most powerful instruments of colonial conquest. Importantly, Ashis Nandy (Nandy, 1988) points out that sexual and moral ideology were fundamental elements on which Western colonialism was founded. According to this perspective, political and economic hegemony symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity. Furthermore, Grosz (1994, pp. 13–14) argues that Western philosophy presumed women and women's bodies to be weaker and ill-equipped to attain masculine achievements and therefore confined her to issues surrounding sexuality and reproduction. This binarization of sexes led to hierarchized pairings such as body/mind, other/self and passion/reason. Elevating the feminine to the status and role occupied hitherto by the masculine in colonial discourse will only replicate the same pattern and hence is not a solution. Rather, the sexual specificity of the body and the ways in which sexual difference contributes to the creation of knowledge needs to be explored. Khmer art, inscriptions, myth and performance traditions offer several opportunities to investigate these ideas. Perspectives offered by these venues to investigate the significance of the feminine were not always followed through by colonial scholars in their body of work.

Despite its drawbacks, it is necessary to acknowledge the extraordinary contribution made to the field by past scholars; without their extensive restoration projects, translations of inscriptions and meticulous preservation of artifacts our present understanding of Khmer history and art would have amounted to very little. It is also necessary to recognize the new directions that more recent scholarship has taken. But the area of women's studies including the role and status of the feminine in ancient Khmer art remains under-explored and is, as (An-

daya, 2007, pp. 113-114) points out, part of a larger under-developed study pertaining to women's studies in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the shortcomings of colonial literature on the subject continue to surface in some of the more recent scholarship, particularly pertaining to the status of the feminine. Trudy Jacobsen, whose works are among the few that focus on women in Cambodia, interpreted the lack of individual goddesses after the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. as indicative of a decline in the status of the feminine<sup>3</sup>. (Roveda, 2005, p. 36) wrote that Khmer society was a masculinized domain and its visual culture highlighted the virile male and passive women. On the other hand, Toni Shapiro Phim (1994), Ashley Thompson (1999) and Paul Cravath (1986; 2007) elucidated the importance of women and the feminine in local performance traditions that was also closely linked to the political and economic arenas. This brings us back to the point made earlier: the treatment of source material. An illustration by way of an analogy might be helpful here. The approach of a researcher towards a topic that has been only partly uncovered (in this case, the significance of the feminine) is much like a detective who attempts to resolve an unsolved case by casting the net further, uncovering new links while re-appraising older ones. The re-examination of older evidence could also suggest promising leads that might throw new light on the case. Unfortunately, unlike most police cases, trying to answer a question relating to the ancient past must, in many ways, remain unsolved. Therefore all a researcher can do is to pick and choose sources that he/she thinks relevant which will, in the best case scenario, bring a little clarity to the question at hand.

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<sup>3</sup>See Jacobsen (2008, pp. 42-45).

## 1.1 Approach to Sources

In my discussion of the significance of the divine feminine in Khmer art, the list of sources include images, monument, landscape, myths, local religious beliefs and performance studies; I also examine how the devotee, site and monument interact with each other. Furthermore, I suggest that these sources are not disparate elements but share a connected relationship to each other. If one were to think of them as unconnected and place them in a hierarchical order, then the narrative that comes out of that perspective would be vastly different than if these sources were considered to be indissolubly linked to each other.

What would justify an integrated approach to sources? For one, in the context of Cambodia (and, on a wider scale, in other parts of Southeast Asia) landscape and religion shared an intimate relationship. Khmer inscriptions repeatedly refer to various geographical features and phenomena as emanations of gods and goddesses. Mus (1975); Aeusrivongse (1976); Choulean (1995) among others, have suggested that this belief may trace back to pre-Hindu times, not only in Cambodia but in other regions of Southeast Asia including Java and Bali. According to this earlier belief system, hidden sources of water and mountains were believed to be the home of spirits and ancestors that gave life to animate and inanimate objects. Stones embedded in the earth and the soil itself, were considered sacred. Introduction to Indian religion and mythology that had its beginnings perhaps in the late centuries B.C.E. likely provided a new vocabulary for the locals to embellish and highlight their own political and cultural concerns and traditions, a process that saw its first material manifestations in the early centuries C.E. As O'Connor (1989, p. 9) wrote, the potent and familiar landscape was "folded into the glamor and radiance" of the Indian epics.

O'Connor continues, "Their own sacred springs and bathing places became tirtha (fords of crossing places from the mundane to the divine world), their sacred mountains where the ancestors were venerated became Siva's mountains above". These combined local and Indian traditions were encapsulated into the layout and design of Khmer religious art and architecture.

The relationship between cosmology and architecture in the context of Angkor is nothing new<sup>4</sup>. In inscriptions<sup>5</sup>, the earth was described as a feminine force and the sky as masculine. Monuments and temples with their deep foundations and soaring towers visually connected the two realms, drawing their spiritual energy from below and above. This energy was diffused throughout the monument, to the images and inscriptions carved on the walls and to those who worshipped at these sites. Linda Connor's use of the term "Unbounded Self"<sup>6</sup> is relevant in this context as well: the temple is a permeable form, attracting its spiritual powers and dissipating them throughout the animate and inanimate objects that engage with it. The notion of permeability is, as F.D.K. Bosch (1960, pp. 231-235) explained it, an important aspect of Hindu mythology where all beings were all connected and sustained by the Cosmic Tree; contrary to the arboreal sense of the term, Bosch suggested that the Tree was actually rhizomatic in structure, having no distinct beginning or end<sup>7</sup>. Bosch's

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<sup>4</sup>George Coedes (1963, pp. 39-53) discusses the symbolism of both Hindu and Buddhist cosmology in various Angkor monuments.

<sup>5</sup>See for example, the 10<sup>th</sup> century Pre Rup inscription.

<sup>6</sup>In the Balinese context, Connor (1982) describes the individual as a receptacle for various supernatural forces that are collectively responsible for the mental and physical well-being of the individual. In that sense, the individual was not a closed unit but one who was coterminous with the spiritual realm.

<sup>7</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari also used the analogy of rhizome to dismantle the restrictive epistemological categories such as subject/object, mind/body, male/female and so on.

argument that traces a non-hierarchical, fluid connection between seemingly disparate realms is useful to understand the relationship that I argue, exists between sources and essential to gain a richer understanding of Khmer art.

Consider these examples where ideas, materials and forms become inextricably entangled and at the same time emerge as a single continuous strand, like a Mobius strip that is Khmer history. Inscriptions eulogized rulers who donated images (both Hindu and Buddhist) to temples, that represented the deities as well as deceased kings and queens, now venerated as ancestors. Some of these inscriptions, carved into the stone, were strategically located at the entrance doorways that marked liminal spaces demarcating the sacred and profane worlds. The temples and monuments of Angkor were contiguous with water bodies, both natural and man-made. Water (as rain falling from the sky and springs that gush out from the earth), with its life-giving powers, was an integral part of the sacred and profane geography. Recent archaeological discoveries have revealed the wide expanse of the ancient Angkor kingdom crisscrossed by moats, ponds, lakes, reservoirs and water channels that likely served

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They cited Gregory Bateson's work on Bali as their inspiration; according to their interpretation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 24), Bateson's use of the word 'plateau' in his descriptions of certain Balinese cultural processes, indicated a "self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end", like a rhizomatic structure. In turn, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) contributed a feminist reading of Deleuze and Guattari where she takes their argument further to critique gender structures and hierarchies in Western feminists and philosophical discourses where the male and female are considered as isolable units, and where the female is relegated to a secondary position. Grosz (1994, p. 211) argues that "The one, in order to be one, must draw a barrier or boundary around itself, in which case it is necessarily implicated in the establishment of a binary- inside/outside, presence/absence". I would like to acknowledge that my critique of gender constructions in past and present scholarship on Khmer art has in part, been influenced by Grosz's approach.

both economic and ritual purposes.

Similarly, dance rituals were also intimately connected to the religious, economic as well as political machinery of the land. The progenitor of the Khmer people is believed to be a dancer Mera, an apsara (Phim and Thompson, 1999, pp. 1-2); these divine creatures were born out of the churning sea of milk, a recurring visual depiction on several Khmer temples. Judging by the great number of images of dancers and respectful references to them in inscriptions, it appears that dance was of immense significance in ancient Cambodia. And the importance accorded to dance and dancers with respect to kingship, religion, political and agricultural rituals even today, speaks of its continued relevance to Khmer society. Dancers are believed to embody precious metals that lay deep in the earth, the same materials that were also used as ritual deposits that give life and sanctity to temples. Moreover, devotees who engaged with all of the above - inscriptions, images, sites and performances - shared, experienced and contributed to the religious, political and economic processes that were embodied them. Seen this way, these various sources- visual, literary, performative and oral historical- are not indissoluble, closed loops but conjoined threads that were interwoven and informed each other.

As an integrative whole, they present a narrative that raises other questions: what was the role of these various sources? Are these sources symbolic screens over the empirical or are they at its strategic center? Can these sources be cast into distinct categories such as “political”, “performative” and so on? Given the cosmological roots of Khmer dance and its relevance to kingship as mentioned earlier, it is hard to draw the line between the “performative” and the “political”. Furthermore, inscriptions on temple walls describe acts by kings, ritual

practices, political events and cultural practices that are set in motion when read out or chanted (as they might have been). If this was indeed the case, it is the text that actually embody the performative moments. At these critical junctures, categories such as “text” and “non-text” need to be suspended.

On the nature of the sources, Geertz (1980, p. 103) argued in the context of Bali that carvings, temples, images, postures and so on symbolized Balinese world view and how people should act, rather than a set of categorical “beliefs”. On the other hand, Chandler suggests that in ancient Cambodia, activities such as building temples could have been perceived as enactments of the “lordliness” of kings; therefore the word “symbol” does not have much meaning in this context, as the king *believed* in the ceremonies that acted out his qualities. O’Connor (1989, p. 7) commented that the crisp designs of the Angkor monuments with their causeways, pavilions, raised terraces and towers was like an “immense proposition” about both the “order of things, and the ritual machinery to ensure that order, endlessly reaffirming the central fact of origin, the axis mundi, where existence touches eternity and the two realms are integrated by a king who, because he participates in divinity, could make life flourish”. The building of temples and the specific choice and location of images could therefore be understood as the king performing a perpetual ritual that would ensure the well-being and prosperity in his kingdom. In this perspective, monuments and images are no longer an ideological screen for the material elements of power but are the very essence of the political, economic and social machinery of ancient Cambodia.

But did this harnessing of divine and profane power center solely on the king? As indicated earlier, local beliefs, epigraphic references, performance tra-

ditions and visual imagery all strongly suggest that the feminine was of a critical source of power to the masculine. Indeed, in some instances it appears that the masculine was powerless without the feminine. Tantric traditions with the emphasis on the significance of the feminine and the idea of dissolution may have resonated with existing beliefs and practices in ancient Cambodia. The selection of distinct imagery, like the powerful *sakti* at Prasat Kravan and the peculiar choice of positioning the larger-than-life images in a way that they would have the effect of overwhelming the senses of the devotee are two suggestive examples. Similarly, the churning waters over the carvings of Vishnu and Lakshmi at Kbal Spean could be perceived as performing the act of dissolution of forms, echoing the left-handed Hindu Tantric practice involving sexual union between the male and the female practitioners. The role of the female/goddess in this act is key to this process.

Tantra also brings to the forefront, the role and importance of the body in the production of knowledge; the body is the site where transformations transpire which ultimately lead to a higher state of being. Inscriptions describe the earth as the body of the goddess who bestows temporal power to the king. All life- human and otherwise- is sustained by her body. The interaction between the male and female as evidenced in myth, performance, literary and visual evidence, is much like the relationship between built forms and cosmology, one of permeability. While in some instances, they retain their distinctiveness, in some others, borders are blurred and forms become fluid. Current performance traditions articulate this notion most effectively when the female dancers often play the role of both the male and female characters. Certain roles also demonstrate the vacillation of binary division, for example when a noble man is portrayed in an almost effeminate manner while the noble females (like Sita, the heroine



of Ramayana) is shown to be braver than her male counterparts. Such notions question the hierarchical gender identity and roles afforded to the feminine that are evident in colonial and some post-colonial literature on Khmer art and culture. But it is not a question of doing away with bounded forms but to recognize and acknowledge those moments where the boundedness is transcended, where hierarchies are dismantled. This transformation comes about when sites, images and inscriptions are activated through performative moments. Sources on ancient Cambodia present several opportunities to witness those key moments.

## **1.2 Historical Background**

Most of what we know about pre-Angkor Cambodia comes from archaeological material and accounts written by Chinese travelers who journeyed to various parts of Southeast Asia for trade or religious purposes. Their information is not always backed by material proof but scholars believe that the Mekong delta region could have been divided into small city-states that had contact with other Southeast Asian regions, China and India. Networks of trade also functioned as channels for the exchange of information, and this is likely the route through which Hinduism and Buddhism were introduced to the Khmer country. A new chapter in the political and social history of Cambodia commenced in 790 C.E., when Jayavarman II took control of Vyadhapura (SE of Cambodia), Sambhupura (present-day Sambor), Wat Phu (currently in Laos) and finally, Aninditapura (near Angkor) (Freeman and Jacques, 2006, p. 9). In 802 C.E. in a possibly Tantric-influenced ceremony held in the sacred Kulen mountains, Jayavarman II proclaimed himself as Chakravartin or 'Ruler of the World'.

He ultimately set up his capital at Hariharalaya, now known as Roluos located near the town of Siem Reap. Thus began the Angkor kingdom which was to last until around the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The Angkor period is distinguished by the extensive building program launched by its rulers; there was an astonishing variety of monuments, whose designs steadily became more complex and elaborate. Most Khmer kings were Saivite although the art and architecture of Angkor revealed an inclusive and broad-minded religious agenda. Kings dedicated images that bore Indianized names in memory of their deceased parents. The Indian influence in Khmer art and architecture is undeniable. But the effects of localization are also abundantly evident. As Wolters (1999, p. 55) defined it, localization was a process by which foreign concepts including those from India, were "...fractured or restated and therefore drained of their original significance". According to Freeman and Jacques (2006, p. 23), Khmer temples with their pyramidal structure, surrounded by moats were meant to represent Mount Meru, the home of the gods. It is likely that they also represented their reverence for mountains and hills, home of ancestral spirits. The Bayon, Jayavarman VII's state temple and one of the most enigmatic Angkor monuments was dedicated to Buddha but it also housed numerous images of autochthonous deities.

Most of the temples at Angkor were constructed from stone that was quarried from the sacred Kulen mountain range. These stones were transported down to the valley on the backs of elephants and possibly also sent down the river in boats. Kings also constructed large, artificial lakes called baray, smaller ponds and waterways which had both religious and economic purposes. Most of these water bodies were arranged around temples, monuments, the royal

palace, rice fields and residences. The meticulous water management was an essential source of water during dry months. There is no question that landscape was an integral aspect of life in ancient Cambodia.

In this dissertation I focus on three different sites, all of which were built during the Angkor period: Prasat Kravan (early 10<sup>th</sup> century), Kbal Spean (12<sup>th</sup> century) and Banteay Srei (late 10<sup>th</sup> century). At these sites, I explore the relationship between the images that are represented, the monuments on which they are depicted, landscape and the visiting devotee. I suggest that Tantra and performance studies further clarify the connected relationship between these various sources, which in turn indicate that the feminine was of critical importance in Khmer art and religion.

### **1.3 Organization of Chapters**

The first chapter Chapter 2 begins with a brief evaluation of the nature of relationship between parts of South and Southeast Asia dating from about the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E., In this context, I critically examine Sheldon Pollock's argument of the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis"; here I stress on the necessity to acknowledge the process of localization of foreign ideas and materials in Cambodia. I argue that Pollock's perspective and my own critique of it might stem from our different approaches to the same source materials.

Chapter 3 comprises of an analysis of Khmer historiography composed largely by colonial scholars. I suggest possible reasons why these writings assigned a peripheral status to the feminine in Khmer art. I speculate whether a fragmented reading of the primary sources could lead to structuring hierarchies

into one's understanding of Khmer art and history which might, in part, elucidate the gender distinctions that have characterized colonial historiography on Cambodia.

In Chapter 4, I begin with a brief review of post-colonial contributions to the study of women in Cambodia and then explore the cosmological and eco-political aspects of the feminine in ancient Cambodia. The second section of the chapter looks at evidence that suggest the existence and practice of Hindu Tantra during the Angkor period. References in inscription, ancient myths, images and performance traditions offer valuable venues of investigation toward this end.

Chapter 5 sets the stage for the study of two sets of images, the Mahalakshmi at Prasat Kravan and the Vishnu and Lakshmi at Kbal Spean. Here I examine the role of Tantra and landscape and their purported effect on the devotee. Hindu Tantric notions and local myths also resonate with each other to underscore the significance of the feminine at these sites. I also suggest that notions of sexuality and eroticism that are generally associated with Tantra (particularly in India) may need to be re-evaluated in the Khmer context.

Performance traditions play a central role in my interpretation of the Banteay Srei Durga and Siva images in Chapter 6. The individual and collective significance of these translocal deities and their dynamic depiction at this temple suggest ways of perceiving the functionality of sacred art, i.e., how the images step beyond their identity as abstract ideas and reveal the cultural processes that they embody.

In Chapter 7, I present the conclusion of my study.

The Appendix contains supplementary images. These images support some of the arguments presented in the main prose.

Some content in this dissertation are from electronic resources found on the internet. However, internet content can sometimes permanently disappear, called link rot. To counter such loss of source information, I have made use of an online service called WebCite<sup>®</sup> that stores archival snapshots of the links that I provide.

CHAPTER 2  
CHARTING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST  
ASIA

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter traces the relationship between parts of India<sup>1</sup> and Southeast Asia, in particular Cambodia. The frequent and likely sustained contact between the regions facilitated the movement of not only material objects but also ideas and concepts between the regions. What happened to these material and non-material things that reached Southeast Asia? While scholars like Oliver Wolters, David Chandler, Michael Vickery, R. Soekmono, Edi Sedyawati and others have drawn attention to the process of localization, Sheldon Pollock in his latest work on the spread of Sanskrit literary culture to Southeast Asia has underscored the more “universal” character of this phenomenon. This latter view appears to subsume the ways in which Indian literary culture was localized in Southeast Asia. Pollock argues for a re-creation of an Indian world in Southeast Asia through the spread of the Sanskritic politico-cultural aesthetic. Instead, my critique of his perspective suggests that the process of adaptation and localization of Indian concepts is vital to the understanding of Southeast Asian religion and culture of the past. Apart from the great variations within this process of localization in Southeast Asia, there also seem to be some com-

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<sup>1</sup>Much like Southeast Asia, India at this time also was not identified as a unified geographical or cultural phenomenon. The land mass was marked by the existence of various major and minor principalities co-existing with and succeeding one another at various points of time. See Thapar (1966, pp. 167-288) for her detailed arguments regarding the political arrangements of northern and southern India between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E.

monalities in the ways in which some of the Sanskrit concepts were localized within Southeast Asia, for example in the veneration of ancestors in the guise of Indian gods and goddesses, practiced both in Indonesia and Cambodia. This could also be indicative of the movement and recycling of ideas (both inter-regional and intra-regional). The interaction between parts of India and Southeast Asia that is explored in this chapter will help establish the background and context for the subsequent discussions that will focus on Cambodia: on the nature of sources that help reconstruct the history of Cambodia, and how alternate readings of the same sources will help elucidate the role and significance of the divine feminine in ancient Cambodia. Much as in this chapter, my thesis suggests that localization renders subtleties and complexities that bring in an intellectual distance from its Indian origins. In this chapter, Pollock's notion of the Sanskrit cosmopolis will be critically examined in the light of select visual and literary evidence from various regions in Southeast Asia.

## **2.2 Early contact between India and Southeast Asia: The development of transoceanic navigation**

The southeast Asian region stretches for about 3100 miles (5000 kilometers) southeastwards from Burma to eastern Indonesia, comprising of highlands, lowlands and intervening seas (Tarling, 1999, p. 55). As a result of the fortuitous condition of being situated between the two extremes of the Asian continent, its harbors and bays functioned as platforms for trade, facilitating connections between near and far-flung regions. For example, mainland traders from Southeast Asia seemed to have used the Straits of Malacca to acquire their goods

from the 'collecting centers' in coastal Malaysia to carry back to the mainland (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, p. 79). It has been suggested that the strong sea-faring tradition and the maritime explorations of the people of the Malay Peninsula made them the pioneers of inter-regional trade, eventually venturing out to China and India (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, pp. 30–64, 73–93). According to Jan Wisseman Christie (1998, p. 344) the commercial activities of early Southeast Asian maritime states included both regional trade as well as "very substantial engagement in import-export and transit trade networks" that connected the smaller islands of Indonesia, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The pattern of trade booms (each larger than the previous one) interspersed with periods of relative lulls was already clearly established by the mid-first millennium of the Common Era.

The development of transoceanic navigation in India, China, Southeast Asia and the Middle East in the early centuries of the Common Era led to a rapid increase in inter-regional maritime traffic between these regions, facilitating not only trade but also the exchange of people, ideas, technology and beliefs between these regions; the circulation of Buddhist missions through India, Southeast Asia and China, trade between the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia and China, pilgrims and students visiting renowned pilgrimage sites and educational institutions, and itinerant travelers created a network of routes that crisscrossed the continents, both over land and sea (Figure 2.1; Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, pp. 95–116).

Based on literary evidence, Wolters (1967) suggested that the sea traffic in Asia evolved in two stages: the first, across the Bay of Bengal to Southeast Asia (chiefly the Malay Peninsula), and the second, which began later, across



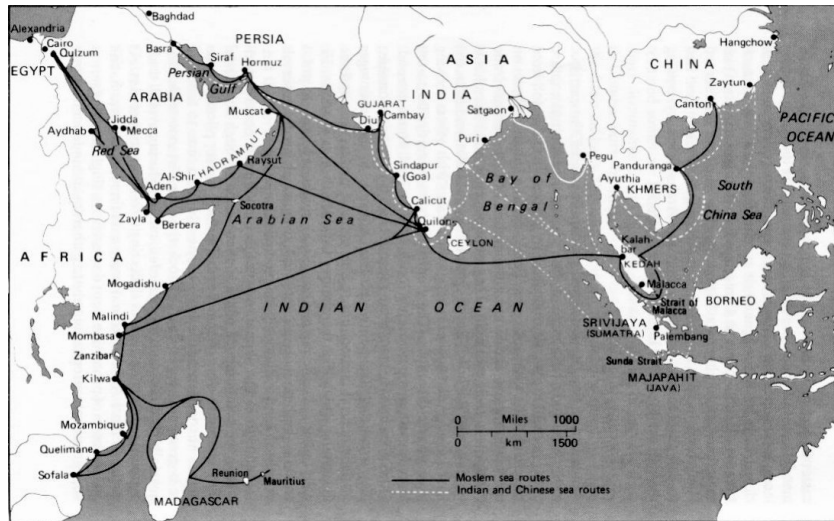


Figure 2.1: Transoceanic trade routes connecting the Middle East, India, China and Southeast Asia (adapted from Abu-Lughod, 1989).

the South China Sea to China. Ships that set sail from the South Indian ports stopped at various locations along coastal Malay Peninsula, to unload and collect goods, repair their ships and wait for favorable winds to either journey onward to China or return home (O'Connor, 1965, pp. 2–3). These locations on the peninsula developed into entrepot ports which have yielded a number of artifacts<sup>2</sup>. Archaeological evidence uncovered along the coast of the Malay Peninsula points to perhaps the earliest maritime contact between a Southeast Asian region and India. Indian sources offer only cryptic clues about early contact with Southeast Asia. The *Jataka* tales, dated between the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. and the 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E., mention a distant land called *Suvarnabhumi* ('The Golden Land'), which scholars infer to be either Southeast Asia or some region in Southeast Asia, since gold was mined extensively in some parts like Borneo

<sup>2</sup>Although many of these objects have been found on sites close to the coast, it should be pointed out that trade between the two regions was most likely conducted over both over land and sea.

(Wheatley, 1961, pp. 179–182; Wolters, 1967, p. 63; Harrisson and O'Connor, 1970, pp. 17–18, 76–79; Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, pp. 66, 164). The Tamil narrative poem *Pattinappalai* which was probably composed around the early centuries of the Common Era, describes a prosperous trade between southern India and Kalagam which some identify as Kedah in the Malay Peninsula (Wolters, 1967, p. 32).

Evidence for the earliest contact between India and Southeast Asia are almost exclusively archaeological, which provide clues for the historical reconstruction of the past. As O'Connor (1972, p. 16) described it:

“As event piled on event, merging imperceptibly to form a past, so the great ash-heap of history, the material residue of action, should form in strata accessible to the archaeologist”. Material remains that date between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B. C. E. to the 5<sup>th</sup> century C. E. include pottery sherds, beads and some gold ornaments. Beads unearthed in Malaysia, Sumatra, Java, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Sarawak and Philippines share similarities with those found in Africa, the Mediterranean region and South India; Arikamedu in South India has been one of the most prolific producers of beads. It has been suggested that while earlier examples may have been imported directly from South India, beads dating after 4<sup>th</sup> century C. E. may have been manufactured locally in certain parts of Southeast Asia including Khao Sam Keo, Kuala Selinsing, Johore Lama (all in the Malay Peninsula), Oc-eo (South Vietnam), Takuapa (Thai Peninsula), Java, Borneo and Laos (Lamb, 1965; Francis, 1990), indicating either a transfer of technology or the existence of an expatriate Indian population in those parts<sup>3</sup> Similarities in burial deposits found in prehistoric Adichanallur (South India) and

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<sup>3</sup>For further details on the bead trade and description of the types of beads found in these areas, see Lamb (1965), Francis (1990), Adhyatman and Arifin (1993) and Ardika (1998).

Sungei Jaong (Borneo). as suggested by Harrisson and O'Connor (1970) also indicate links between the regions from very early times. Objects including seals in either Prakrit or Sanskrit (probably originating from Nagarjunakonda, an early Buddhist center in South India) and a Tamil inscription incised onto a goldsmith's touchstone have been unearthed at some sites on the Thai Peninsula<sup>4</sup> Cibuaya<sup>5</sup> has yielded artifacts that suggest their link with the trade network that connected Vietnam, China, Sri Lanka, southern and western India<sup>6</sup>. The mitered Vishnu images that were discovered at Cibuaya tentatively dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century C. E. bear a close resemblance to certain images that were unearthed in the Thai Peninsula which in turn share similarities with 4<sup>th</sup> century imagery from the Krishna valley in South India<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>Little information can be gleaned from the inscription as it only mentions the name of the touchstone owner. See Jacq-Hergoualc'h (2002, pp. 86–87). The other seals have been dated to between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, and have a script that is very similar to the South Indian Pallava script. Most of the words seem to indicate the name and owner of the merchandise whose wrapping was secured by these stone seals. Unfortunately, due to the fragmentary nature of the inscriptions, little is known about the nature of the merchandise.

<sup>5</sup>Cibuaya is situated about 3.5 miles (6 kilometers) from the western Javanese coastline.

<sup>6</sup>There is speculation that Cibuaya (along with Batujaya, another site that has produced artifacts from other parts of the world) might have been coastal sites with long-distance trading connections. The river valley trails of this region provided access to the hinterlands that supplied forest products like gold which were in high demand in the international markets.

<sup>7</sup>(O'Connor, 1972) has discussed the connections between images found in Chaiya (southern Thailand) to the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century images from the Krishna valley.

## **2.3 Nature of early contact between India and Southeast Asia**

Other than the fragmented remains, Indians have left little record of their travels and activities in Southeast Asia. However, these and other material objects of the period suggest that there was an active traffic of artisans, merchants and perhaps Buddhist missionaries and monks and Brahmins that traversed the sea and land routes between India, Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, China and the Middle East. It is also suggestive of a certain amount of innovation and localization of artifacts even at this early stage, like that of the Vishnu image from Cibuaya. Despite references to resident Brahmin populations in parts of Southeast Asia<sup>8</sup>, there seems to be little material proof of Brahmanic influence on the early trading principalities. However, this does not preclude the circulation of information and ideas between the two regions effected by this traffic, the material evidence for which emerges after the 5<sup>th</sup> century. From the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards there were changes in the interaction between the two regions reflecting the evolving political, economic and social climate in these regions.

## **2.4 Phase Two: Images and Inscriptions (6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E.)**

After the Pallavas established their supremacy in South India between the last quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Mamallapuram developed as an important port on the southeast coast of peninsular India from where ships set sail to Southeast Asia and China. Chinese sources indicate the existence of a number of city-states in the Southeast Asian region including

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<sup>8</sup>See Adhyatman and Arifin (1993).

Panpan, Langasuka and South Kedah<sup>9</sup> (southern, eastern and western coasts of the Malay Peninsula respectively), that also interacted with India, China and Sri Lanka. Artifacts unearthed at these sites not only suggest Indian influences but importantly, a fair amount of interpretation and adaptation of these influences. Much like the beads mentioned earlier, some of the images that have been found in the Malay and Thai peninsulas, Java and Northeast Sumatra could have been either imported from the Indian peninsula, made by South Indians in Southeast Asia or were copies of Indian prototypes made by local South Indian artisans (Pallava and Chola) and the Amaravati school<sup>10</sup>. The Buddhist remains unearthed at Panpan and Langasuka reveal a mixture of not only north and south Indian elements, but also Sri Lankan and Srivijayan features that indicate the cross-currents of several artistic styles coursing through the areas.

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<sup>9</sup>The archaeological finds unearthed at the different sites in South Kedah indicate that this site might have been active at various intervals, particularly in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, p. 443). However, it is unclear whether the names Kalagam, Kadaram, Kataha and Jiecha mentioned in early Greek, Indian and Chinese texts are synonymous or whether they refer to South Kedah (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, p. 193). Only the Chinese texts contain additional details about the place they call Jiecha; they mention that the ships that sailed up from the Straits of Malacca from Palembang-Srivijaya would wait at Jiecha to catch the favorable monsoon winds to proceed to the Bay of Bengal (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, pp. 193–194). Jiecha is described as a prosperous city, protected by many walls where valuable spices, tin and exotic woods could be procured. It had many gardens and springs and the local population coexisted with Muslims, Indians and Persians (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, pp. 195–196). However, the material remains at this site do not indicate that the settlement was very complex indicating that either the Chinese were referring to an as yet undiscovered site or that their accounts were somewhat embellished.

<sup>10</sup>The Amaravati artistic tradition has been dated to between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E., and flourished under the reign of the Satavahana dynasty (230 B.C.E. – 200 C.E.) (Sastri, 1966, p. 3).

## 2.5 Expansion of trade and its after-effects in South India and Southeast Asia

The 9<sup>th</sup> century witnessed several changes in the international political arena including the establishment of the Angkor kingdom. In coastal Vietnam, the Hindu Cham kingdom began to expand its geographical boundaries from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, continuing its expansion for the next two hundred years. Sea routes originating in Central Asia developed rapidly because of wars along the commercial land routes (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, pp. 262–264). Persian texts mention improvements in maritime navigation during this time. In South India, the Pallavas strengthened their political hold over the other warring chiefdoms like the Chalukyas, Cholas and Pandyas until around 850 C.E. (Sastri, 1966, pp. 101–105, 146–160). On the economic front, merchant guilds were established in South India and their presence in Southeast Asia is attested by inscriptions as well as images.

The volume of trade in Southeast Asia “expanded modestly” (Wissman Christie, 1998, p. 344) in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries and increased dramatically in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, continuing its expansion until the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. The 10<sup>th</sup> century in South India was marked by political and economic changes. Taking advantage of the weakening power of the Pallavas, the Chola dynasty came to power in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E., reigning supreme for the next three centuries. They augmented the financial base for their rapidly expanding kingdom by further developing internal and overseas maritime trade<sup>11</sup> (Sastri,

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<sup>11</sup>A passage from a Chola king reveals the rationale behind encouraging merchants and their trade,

Make the merchants of distant foreign countries who import elephants and

1955, pp. 592–610; Wade, 2009, p. 236). The commercial expansion of the Cholas seems to have led to a conflict with Srivijaya, the maritime kingdom in southern Sumatra. Although the two kingdoms shared a cordial relationship, things seemed to have soured sometime in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century for reasons that are still not clear. Chola inscriptions mention three raids, in 1017<sup>12</sup>, 1025<sup>13</sup> and 1068-

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good horses attach to yourself by providing them with villages and decent dwellings in the city, by affording them daily audience, presents and allowing them profits. Then those articles will never go to your enemies.

Wade 2009, p. 236.

This passage also suggests the independent status of the merchants whose well-being and good favor needed to be assured by the rulers in order to have access to their valuable products.

<sup>12</sup>Jacq-Hergoualc’h (2002, p. 356) suggested that if this raid did take place, then it could be interpreted “with some imagination” as a response on the part of the Chola king to the appeal of the Khmer king Suryavarman I who, according to a 11<sup>th</sup> century Chola inscription, had sent a chariot to his Chola counterpart in exchange for military aid. Jacq-Hergoualc’h (2002, pp. 351–355) pointed out that in the light of Wolters’ theory regarding the need by the new Khmer king Suryavarman I (whose origin could perhaps be traced to the Malay Peninsula) to assert his suzerainty over his rival from Tambralinga, and the waning power of Srivijaya, he might have appealed to his Chola counterpart for help. However there is no conclusive evidence to support this theory.

<sup>13</sup>This raid is mentioned in the 1030-31 C. E. inscription on the Brihadeeshwara temple in Thanjavur, praising the king Rajendra who captured and devastated thirteen cities in Southeast Asia including Sumatra and parts of the Malay Peninsula. The practicality of this event has been questioned by scholars like Spencer (1983, pp. 141–143) who posit that such a time-consuming and demanding expedition would have taken years to complete. According to his calculation, Rajendra I’s expedition to the Gangetic plains of North India and this particular maritime raid on Southeast Asian ports would have happened simultaneously and therefore there would have been insufficient troops to manipulate both in addition to guarding the territories in the Chola heartland and Sri Lanka. However, given the lack of corroborative evidence for his theory, the “pattern of compulsive expansion” by the Cholas during this period and the supposed ambition of Rajendra I to surpass his father’s accomplishments, Spencer agrees that the raid is “very plau-

69 C. E. <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, despite three alleged raids, there is no evidence that Chola political power extended to this coast.

Interaction between parts of India and Southeast Asia appeared to be steady rather than intermittent; for example, Javanese inscriptions from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century strongly suggest their knowledge of a diverse Indian population that was updated periodically<sup>15</sup>. This period also witnessed marked similarities between the cultural expressions of South India and Southeast Asia, no doubt engendered by the traffic of ideas and objects between the two regions. Magnificent temples and monuments were constructed by royal and elite patrons, whose deeds of generosity were committed to posterity on inscriptions, often sible and even probable". Perhaps the raid was a punitive measure (such as the one conducted earlier on Sri Lanka (McKinnon, 1994, p. 15)) against the exorbitant duty placed by Srivijaya on the goods carried by Indian or other traders traveling through the Straits of Malacca.

<sup>14</sup> According to a later Chola inscription, king Virarajendra "conquered Kadaram on behalf of a king who had come in search of his aid and protection, and... afterwards handed over the conquered kingdom to his protg" and the Chola king "was pleased to give [it back] to [its] king who worshipped [his] feet [which bore] ankle rings" (Spencer, 1983, p. 149), (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, p. 357). It is possible that the raid might have been an attempt to crush a revolt on the Peninsula.

<sup>15</sup> Javanese inscriptions dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries reveal details about South Indian merchant traffic in this part of Southeast Asia. The Kalirungan inscription of 883 C.E. contains a list of foreigners which includes mainland Southeast Asians from Champa, Burma and Cambodia, and South Asian traders from Kalinga (Orissa), Ayyavole (a prominent merchant guild in South India located at Aihole, the capital of the early Chalukyas) and Pandikira (both in Karnataka) (Wisseman Christie, 1998, p. 367). The 1021 C.E. inscription from the delta region of east Java mentions foreigners from *Kling* (Kalinga, Orissa), *Drawida* (Dravida/South India), *Campa* (Champa), and *Kmir* (Khmer) (ibid). By the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century, two changes can be noticed in the lists: *Drawida* is replaced by *Colika* (Chola) and *Pandikira* by Karnataka. The 1053 C.E. inscription adds the name *Malyala* to the list, presumably people from the Malayalam-speaking region of south-western coastal India.



on these temples themselves. In many regions, these inscriptions were composed in both Sanskrit and the local language. The similarities led some scholars to term the cultural expressions of Southeast Asia as 'Indianization'; Southeast Asia was even appended to the Indian subcontinent as 'Greater India'.

## 2.6 'Indianization'

The meaning and use of the term 'Indianization' with relation to Southeast Asia in general and Cambodia in particular has been a contested one especially in the context of its use in colonial scholarship and later in Indian writings on Cambodia<sup>16</sup>. The majority of early scholarship on Southeast Asia began with the assumption that cultural and political complexity in the region was directly influenced by India<sup>17</sup> (some examples include: Coédès, 1962; Parmentier, 1950; Marchal, 1930). However, the scholarship of J C van Leur, William Solheim, Philip Rawson, Nidhi Aeusrivongse, Oliver Wolters, Michael Vickery and David Chandler among others have cited evidence to demonstrate that Southeast Asia already had in place a developed agricultural tradition, regional commercial networks as well as local artistic traditions, and that their advanced seafaring traditions strongly suggested long-distance travel which then enabled them to observe other cultures and carry back those ideas to their own country.

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<sup>16</sup>For a brief summary of select views on the topic, see Vickery (1998, pp. 51–60).

<sup>17</sup>The number of studies that have speculated on the influence of Southeast Asia on India have been very limited: one such early study was carried out by D. Devahuti (1965). Another more recent work is by Alessandra Iyer (1998) who suggested that the portrayal of *Natyasastra* dance imagery on the Indonesian temple Prambanan may have been the inspiration for its depiction on the later South Indian temple at Chidambaram.

Although some objects are almost certainly Indian in origin<sup>18</sup> many of the Hindu and Buddhist artifacts that were unearthed in various parts of Southeast Asia reveal clear Southeast Asian inflections. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore the presence of Indian influence in Southeast Asian art and culture.

It is difficult to pin point the origin of 'Indianization' but it was a process that was manifest for several centuries in the art, religion, political and literary traditions of Southeast Asia. Chandler (2000, p. 11) explains that the process of cultural change is complex and answers to queries about when and why Indian cultural elements came to be preferred and which ones were chosen, rejected or revised are similarly complicated. What exactly did this process signify? Pollock (2006, p. 10) argues that such terms (Hellenization, Romanization and Sinicization are some other examples he cites) "serve to signal the historically significant ways in the past of being translocal, of participating—and knowing one was participating—in cultural and political networks that transcended immediate community". It marked the process of conscious interaction with ideas that were foreign to one's own culture. As for the actual expression of such an interaction, Wolters (1999, p. 21) argues that rather than seeing 'Indianization'

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<sup>18</sup>To cite a few examples, Stanley O'Connor has made a detailed study of a group of three images unearthed at Takuapa on the western Malay Peninsular coast. O'Connor (1965, p. 182) has suggested that these "almost classical statements of later Pallava art" may have been imported from India or made in Takuapa, by Indian artisans. Kota Cina in northeastern Sumatra has also yielded some artifacts including a *linga* and *yoni* base, two Buddha images, a Vishnu and a female deity, all in Chola style (McKinnon, 1994). Similarly, a Bhairava and Vishnu (found at Vieng Sra, about 20 miles south of the Bay of Bandon) and Surya image (at Chaiya) dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century C. E. also suggest Chola initiative in this region. O'Connor (1972, p. 62) has emphasized that the presence of these images on the Malay Peninsula "should be associated with the continuum of cultural and commercial relations" that existed between the isthmian tract and southeastern India for many centuries.

as a process that began an entirely new period in Southeast Asia, he prefers to view the working of certain Hindu religious (and not political) conceptions that threw ancient and existing local beliefs into sharper focus. Chandler (2000, p. 11) goes on to say that labels such as “Great” (connected with Sanskrit, Hinduism and court culture) and “Little” (Khmer, folk religion and villages) traditions are not particularly useful because village wisdom “always penetrated the court, and princely values, enshrined in Hindu epics and Buddhist legends, or jataka tales, penetrated village life. Tony Day and Craig Reynolds (2000, p. 4) comment that regardless of the nature of ‘Indianization’, it entailed “one of the most significant interactions between knowledge and power in the history of the region”. The writings of Pollock (2000, 2006) on the ‘Sanskrit Cosmopolis’, where he explores the ways by which Sanskrit articulated particular political expressions both in premodern India and Cambodia, offers a platform to discuss the notions of ‘Indianization’ versus localization. Out of Pollock’s expansive and in depth analysis of the topic, I select a few related points for this present discussion: how local political ideology was articulated using Sanskrit literary forms and the manner in which Indian artistic vocabulary was also utilized to highlight autochthonous cultural, economic and political concerns. Pollock’s arguments center around the politico-literary culture that was engendered by the Sanskrit cosmopolis, a culture that he characterizes almost exclusively as male-centric. He does point out the pervasive presence of the feminine in all Khmer inscriptions but subsumes the significance of that phenomenon. The third point that I discuss is to emphasize that this presence of the feminine was vital to the understanding of Khmer political, economic and religious culture. My critique of Pollock’s argument and my choice of discussion points highlight one of the themes in this dissertation, namely, how does one approach source material.

Rather than categorizing them into “political”, “performative” and so on, I suggest that inscriptions, images, monuments etc. have permeable boundaries that inform and connect with one another. In this perspective, the presence of the feminine cannot be dismissed as peripheral but as an integral aspect of Khmer political culture.

## 2.7 Defining the ‘Sanskrit Cosmopolis’

Sheldon Pollock’s work on this topic spans several years and culminated in a monumental and meticulously researched tome titled *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. As the title suggests, Pollock situates his work in India but he also discusses the spread of the Sanskrit literary culture to parts of Southeast Asia, including Cambodia. Pollock (2000, 2006) has termed the period between 500 and 1500 C.E. in South and Southeast Asia as a “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” a “supraregional dimension” where Sanskrit produced certain forms of cultural and political expression that underwrote a cosmopolitan order that “never objectified, let alone enforced, its universalism” (Pollock, 2006, pp. 11–12). This process was slow and tentative, where the language that was once exclusivist (restricted to use in ritual and associated with knowledge systems such as grammar and phonetics) in India was politicized and its uses and users expanded<sup>19</sup> (Pollock, 2006, pp. 14, 39–40, 50);

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<sup>19</sup>In the South Asian context, Pollock (2006, p. 118) explains that the division between a regional language (Prakrit) and the emerging cosmopolitan Sanskrit in the way they were used in inscriptions (documentary, and ideational and expressive) could denote the existence or emergence of separate discursive spheres. Sanskrit was breaking out from its ritual sphere to take on “unprecedented expressive tasks in public” while Prakrit was being relegated to the “mundane documentary” world. The 6<sup>th</sup> century Pallava inscription written in the time of Simhavarman

within three centuries it became sole medium used by the ruling elite to express their power, through a geographical expanse stretching from the Gandhara region (present northwest Pakistan) across to Java (Southeast Asia), through a process that took place with neither military or religious coercion, nor sort of legal or administrative apparatus.

By the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian subcontinent was characterized by the existence of a “linguistically homogenous and conceptually standardized form of Sanskrit political poetry” (Pollock, 2006, p. 122). Pollock (2006, *ibid*) points out that although areas north and west of India were not enveloped in this transformation, Southeast Asia was for reasons that are not entirely clear. Nevertheless, with the spread of Sanskrit within two centuries of the Common Era, Pollock (2006, p. 115) suggests that there was a shared “Sanskrit way of speaking about and conceiving of the nature of political power” not only within India but eastwards to Champa, Java, other islands of Indonesia and even part of Sri Lanka. Pollock (2006, p. 128) speculates that the purpose served by the aesthetic and ideational qualities of the language in the emerging cosmopolitan system may partially answer the question of why Sanskrit was used in the Khmer society; according to him (Pollock, 2006, p. 124) the adoption of Sanskrit across Southeast Asia ushered in a “new political vision and literary aesthetic that were inseparable from it and unthinkable without it”. There was a shared set of political representations and not merely a shared language. Pollock (2006, p. 234) argues that the cultural space of the Indian epic Mahabharata extended outside South Asia through the physical spread of the texts (or versions of the (525–550 C.E.) is the first example of a Sanskrit inscription that begins with an invocation to the gods, preceded by a genealogical trace of the king and his eulogy which could become the formula of most Sanskrit inscriptions in the literary cosmopolis (Pollock, 2006, pp. 120–121). Similarly in the Tamil portion of the inscription were enumerated the details of a land grant.

text) to regions outside of South Asia (like Java and Cambodia), thereby stating that it was the South Asian space that was being created outside its apparent physical boundaries. The Mahabharatha narrative was thus the “central” force in inspiring the “frequent cultural expression in everything from conventional epigraphical allusions to plastic representations on bas reliefs on temple walls” (Pollock, 2006, p. 234). The Khmers, according to Pollock (2006, p. 234) reconstituted their cognitive landscape, identifying their own natural formations such as mountains and rivers with those in the Mahabharatha. He says “The Khmers, according to one compelling argument, saw themselves as living not in some overseas extension of India but inside an Indian world...” (Pollock, 2006, p. 234). Pollock (2006, p. 254) continues that the “transethnicity” of Sanskrit enabling its cosmopolitanism “comprised a view from everywhere in general and nowhere in particular”. This kind of transethnicity (Pollock, 2006, p. 254–255) was universalist in linguistic substance, political imagination and expressive style, and therefore it was undifferentiated from the Sanskrit of the Paramaras of Rajasthan, and that of the Khmers. Pollock (2006, p. 255) also argues that the stability of Sanskrit grammar was a model of the moral, political and social order; the learning of the language was a component of kingliness itself and this competence, he points out, was celebrated by kings like Suryavarman II through public poetry. This ensured a uniformity and coherence in its use across the cosmopolis and consequently occluded any “local coloring”, for example, the “idiom, intelligence, and political imagination” in Khmer inscriptions were the same found in India (Pollock, 2006, pp. 125–126); Pollock argues that this uniformity often made it impossible to localize a work of Sanskrit literature. He says that “it is precisely this impossibility that constituted Sanskrit’s greatest attraction for those in quest of a universalist form of power, or seeking

fame that transcended the limits of time and space” (Pollock, 2006, p. 256).

Pollock’s arguments regarding the expanse and character of the Sanskrit cosmopolitanism implies a uniformity of cultural practices and agendas, reminiscent of early Indian scholarship on Khmer visual and literary traditions (for example, that of P. N. Bose (1927) and R. C. Majumdar (1944)) that assumes an Indian constitution for Cambodia with only a gossamer veneer (if any) of localism. Pollock’s arguments about the homogenous character of the Sanskrit language across the literary cosmopolis glosses over the “localisms” which I argue are crucial elements that, rather than corrupt the Sanskrit literary culture enriches it. To recognize the existence of this variability in the use of the language points to the working of a local initiative in transforming new material in order to draw attention to autochthonous practices, and how these new inputs were amalgamated into pre-existing ones. Wolters (1999, p. 53) provides a counter-argument to Pollock’s theory about a universal literary culture when he points out that Sanskrit “loan” words undergo transformation in their signification when they are used in a new cultural and historical context. Wolters quotes Ferdinand de Saussure (1959, p. 9) who said that language is “both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty”. In the context of “loan” words, Saussure (1959, p. 22) also points out that “language is a system that has its own arrangement” and therefore what is external and internal to it is easily discernible. Using chess as an example, Saussure (1959, p. 22) explains that the movement of the game from Persia to Europe is external but “everything having to do with its system and rules is internal”. Andaya (2006, p. 51) also comments that language provides valuable insights into local life because “the adoption of foreign terms usually occurs within a se-

mantic field where words can take on new meanings as they interrelate". When a "loan" word operates in a linguistic system it can no longer be considered foreign because it takes meaning "only through its relation with and in opposition to, other words associated with it...". Sanskrit words that are used in the Khmer or Javanese contexts thus should be considered as part of the local language system.

The oldest identified Sanskrit inscription (dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century C. E. ) belonging to the Khmer context provides a convincing example of this process. The inscription was found at a site called Wat Phu in present-day Laos, which has been suggested to be the oldest center of Khmer power (Guy, 2009, p. 132). The patron of the inscription is named as the king Devanika who traveled to Champassak (where Wat Phu is located) [to be] "installed in supreme royal power by the auspicious *Sri Lingaparvata*, honoured since antiquity" (Wolters, 1999, p. 226); it meant that through the performance of a royal consecration ceremony, royal authority was conferred upon him. After this act, Devanika built a sacred bathing tank and named it Kurukshetra, after the tank in northern India named in the Mahabharatha. As Guy (2009, p. 133) explains, "This Southeast Asian ruler was both evoking the authority of Sanskritic brahmanical texts and ritual, and rooting them in his landscape". Guy goes on to elaborate that the Wat Phu inscription is extraordinary in the way in which the local Southeast Asian kings and rulers appropriated the "Hindu World" for themselves, incorporating it into their geographical and metaphysical landscape, thus "they ensured that this imported vision was infused with meaning throughout their world, not by reference to India" (Guy, 2009, p. 133).



## 2.8 Cultural and political diversity in the Sanskrit Cosmopolis

Wolters (1999, p. 50–51) says that historians of Southeast Asia (and, I might add, South Asia) tend to overlook cultural diversity within the region and quotes Milton Osborne who emphasizes that “it remains important to give attention to the differences that do set geographical region apart from geographical region, ethnic group apart from ethnic group...”. Wolters (1999, p. 51) also mentions the use of Sanskrit across Southeast Asia as an example of cultural diversity: while Cambodia continued to use Sanskrit until the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Java started using their local language from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards indicating that the cultural influence and use of the language differed from region to region. Vickery (1998, p. 58) quotes Jan Wisseman Christie’s work on Sanskrit inscriptions of West Borneo where she pertinently points out that the content of those inscriptions appear far removed from the historical, economic and social contexts within which they are found. The inscription describes “characteristically” Indian gifts to Brahmans including ghee, sesame seeds and 20,000 to 70,000 cows in a forested region where the wealth was probably derived from gold trade and not agriculture and where land was most likely not valued the way it was in parts of India. Christie suggests that the gifts that were presented were probably valued as the ritual equivalents of the Indian items. Here is an example of not only of Sanskrit used in a ‘documentary’ context (i.e. non-literary) but also that the language was perhaps used to literally substitute its ritual contents for those of equal local value. Driving home the significance of “localisms”, Wolters (1999, p. 56) states that although the map of Southeast Asia resembles a layout of similar *mandala*, what we observe at a closer range “is by no means clear but more significant: the product of history in the form of multifarious

constructions of foreign materials that varied according to the part of the region we are studying and, because of the influence of the local cultures, would not have encouraged a region-wide awareness of a common “Indian heritage”.

The *mandala* (“circle of kings”) formation proposed by Wolters as a religio-political representation of premodern Southeast Asia and its appropriation of Sanskrit also provides a strong argument against the kind of homogeneity of literary and political culture in Pollock’s argument. Despite the sweeping statements of “universalist” rule among the polities in the Sanskrit cosmopolis, these declarations appear to have been propelled by local political, religious and economic concerns. In Southeast Asia, (Wolters, 1999, p. 27) explains that the claims of universal power were articulated within the context of the *mandala* form of political organization, peculiar to the region. Here, one king claimed hegemony over others based on his identity as a “universal” ruler, making the other chiefs his allies and vassals<sup>20</sup>. Wolters (1999, p. 39) also points out that the multiplicity of *mandala* did not mean that the ruler’s influence extended to only the territories under his control but as an emanation of divinity, he would proclaim himself as a “universal” monarch. But this kind of articulation of power did not translate to the actual geopolitical situation, that *mandala* centers accepted each other on equal terms. As Wolters (1999, *ibid*) explains “Overlords, endowed with powerful personalities, required limitless space to leave their mark on their generation, but political space was rarely reorganized”.

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<sup>20</sup>Wolters (1999, pp. 35–36) suggests that while parts of Southeast Asia might have been characterized by the presence of *mandala* that were somewhat ephemeral in nature, this was not the case in Angkor even as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Inscriptions suggest that the Khmer-speaking region had a fairly well-established territorial identity that survived “virtually intact” for half a millennium.

According to Wolters, the *mandala* system was built on the foundation of cognatic kinship, a key feature of Southeast Asian societies. Wolters (1999, p. 18) elaborates that in cognatic kinships, there is a downgrading of the importance of descent from a particular male or female, and therefore other cultural factors would be needed “to promote leadership and initiative beyond a particular locality”. Wolters (1999, p. 18–19) develops the idea of the “men of prowess” around this notion, defining him as a leader with an extraordinary amount of “soul stuff”, whose qualities and attributions would distinguish him from his kinsmen. His capacity for leadership and spiritual endowment were recognized when his followers would realize that being close to him would bring material benefits and that their spiritual substance would participate in his. These “men of prowess” through their elevated status, were believed to join the deceased ancestors whose blessings were needed for the prosperity of the people. These practices and beliefs resonated with certain Hindu beliefs, for example, in the Pasupata sect (popular in Southeast Asia in the early centuries of the Common Era) where the idea of *bhakti* emphasized a personal relationship with the gods through “elitist teacher-inspired sects” (Wolters, 1999, pp. 21–22). This provided a means for political leaders (men of prowess) to claim a superior divine connection with the gods, particularly Siva (believed to be the sovereign god who created the universe), and could claim to participate in Siva’s divine authority. Wolters (1999, p. 22) suggests that by participating in the personal Siva cult, the ruler’s prowess was “coterminous with the divine authority pervading the universe” and this was one reality that emerged from the interaction with Indian Hinduism. Wolters (1999, p. 25) also cites two inscriptions from Java (written in Sanskrit) and Cambodia (dated between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) that suggest the hierarchical relationship between a chief and his followers. In these

inscriptions, the ruler's allies identify themselves as *bhakta* which translate to "worshippers" or "princes devotes [to him]". Day and Reynolds (2000, p. 4) argue that the process of adopting Indic notions "formed a certain discourse of power, a discourse entailing concepts about relations between leaders and followers and about the ways of representing and organizing the state". Therefore it could be argued that Sanskrit could have functioned as a vehicle to formulate and articulate local political processes. By Wolters' argument the word *bhakta* would imply the personal relationship between the ruler and the gods but underscore the relationship between the chief and his followers within the contours of cognative kinship. Importantly, Wolters (1999, p. 39) points out that the *mandala* was a lowland phenomenon and the people of the highlands were beyond the reach of this arrangement. Wolters quotes Paul Wheatley who said that "the Sanskrit tongue was chilled to silence at 500 metres".

## **2.9 Performative character of the literary and the visual**

Pollock's analysis of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis is mainly concerned with the practice of literary texts, or "how people do things with texts" (Pollock, 2006, p. 568), and in this respect, they can also be applicable to understanding the function of art and architecture of Cambodia and other parts of Southeast Asia. I suggest that images and monuments (which can be cited as embodiments of political culture) can also be perceived as capturing or enacting a performative moment. Moreover, unlike Pollock, I suggest that these moments portray cultural and political notions that are particular to a region/polity. Furthermore, the literary is often implicated in the visual and vice versa; for example, by using visual imagery, inscriptions often illustrate local religious and political concepts

and events, and art can articulate mytho-religious and historical practices of the time. Myth, text and art are therefore components in a connected loop. The distinction between the functionality of the literal and the visual is not always clear.

Pollock (2006, p. 129) argues that the fact that inscriptions are found at temple sites “need signify no more than that the temple construction was also the occasion, or the temple itself a site, for the narrativization of the royal person’s life” and therefore the discourse found in Khmer prasasti (or eulogy) is “completely comparable” to those found in inscriptions and copper plates in India that are also not addressed to gods. Pollock therefore treats the inscriptions merely as political-cultural documents of Angkorean Cambodia that is a discourse on elite status and roles in society. There is no doubt that this is indeed a significant feature of the inscriptions but it can be argued that the role of inscriptions may not be restricted to just the documentary aspects.

Nidhi Aeusrivongse (1976, p. 112) suggests that temples symbolized mountains which were believed to be the home of ancestors and spirits whose blessings were essential for the welfare of the land and its people. Therefore these temples (including the images and inscriptions sculpted on their walls) commemorated to these gods and ancestors at these holy sites could be conceived as offerings to the gods. Inscriptions need not be viewed as solely ‘documents’ but also as prayers and offerings that are inscribed to the gods. Furthermore, the location of inscriptions, often containing cryptic verses, at the doorways of temples suggests a performative role for them. Doorways mark the transitional point between the sacred and profane worlds and inscribing them with messages (for example with Tantric content) that are amorphous in meaning may act

as a *yantra*, an aid in the transformative process that a devotee experiences (Figure 2.2). A *yantra* need not be restricted to an image or a diagram but signifies a tool that helps the devotee to achieve his transformative experience. Inscriptions can therefore serve multiple purposes than just being a record of events or a political statement. The great temples made of stone (considered a medium worthy of only gods) were believed not merely to be replicas of the heavenly world but were real and present manifestations of the universe (Mabbett and Chandler, 1995, pp. 16–18, 121–122). In this perspective, the inscriptions, as an indissoluble part of the monument could be interpreted as belonging to both the sacred and profane worlds.



Figure 2.2: Inscription carved on the doorway of the Lolei temple, 893 C.E.

O'Connor's analysis of a relief in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Indonesian temple Candi Sukuh brilliantly illustrates the performative nature of images. Through a compelling description of this relief (Figure 2.3) O'Connor (1985, pp. 56–57) melds image, thought and practice that he suggests would have brought the imagery

to life for its viewers:

“Ignited in the mind were images of the smelter sweating over the rising gorge of fire; the splintered roasting ore glowing in the reeking smoke; a pod of orange-white bloom bulging in the hearth; the blood-red threads of slag tapped off in steady trickles; the phased rhythm of the bellows with its pulse of spurting air; the granite hammer-stone ringing on chilled steel; the searing hiss of white-hot iron plunged in water. All this and more—the dangers faced by miners intruding in the living earth—would constitute transparent currents forming a penumbra of thought and feeling, through which, and with the cooperation of which, the Sukuh relief was read.”



Figure 2.3: Relief at Candi Sukuh, Central Java, *ca* 15<sup>th</sup> century (Kinney et al., 2003).

In his article on the relief, O'Connor (1985, pp. 52–70) argues that the import of the relief is rooted in the local traditions and beliefs surrounding the connection between metallurgy and the transformation of souls.

Another example is the city of Angkor Thom with the state temple Bayon (both built between the late 12<sup>th</sup> to late 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C. E. ) situated in its center. The approach to the four gates of the city is lined on both sides by rows of *deva* and *asura* who hold the body of a snake in their hands. This is meant to represent a scene from the legend of the Churning of the Sea of Milk. Consequently, the state temple that is located in the center of the city becomes the pivot, or Mount Mandara in the myth, where the churning actually takes place (Freeman and Jacques, 2006, p. 75–76). While it can be argued that this depiction is meant to symbolize the mythological event (which produced great riches from the sea including the elixir of immortality), it could also be suggested that this could be perceived as an actual and permanent enactment of the event itself whereby the sanctity of site and images (and by extension the power of the king who built it) is made that much more immediate and important. In either case, it is a statement that was meant to underscore its religious and economic significance in Angkorean Cambodia: that the prosperity of the kingdom was like or, indeed, *was* the fabulous treasure that arose out of the ocean. As McGowan (2008, p. 249) pertinently points out, art historical analysis needs to step beyond mere identification of images but one needs to “examine the possible localized meanings of the stories selected within their architectural context as reflective of a performative and spiritually edifying experience”.



## 2.10 Replication or localization?

Pollock (2006, p. 256) states that a traveler wandering through central Java, Angkor in Cambodia, Gangaikondacholapuram in the Chola country and Pravarapura in Kashmir would have found so many common features that they would seem to be constituted of a single culture-power establishment. While Pollock (2006, pp. 30–31) emphasizes that his study is about large-scale cultural and political processes (and not “sovereign particularities”), his claim for a universality undermines the uniqueness and richness of cultural expressions of Southeast Asia. Vickery (1998, p. 56) cites Mireille Benisti in J.G. de Casparis’ article on the topic of early Southeast Asian art with specific reference to Cambodia: “If numerous connections exist, [there was]... no transmission of a coherent whole from India back to the Khmer country. At whatever chronological level envisaged, right back to those closest to the first Khmer art, no monument, no region, no style of India shows the model, the archetype of Khmer décor”.

According to Roveda (2005, p. 8–9), the production of Khmer images were in accordance with the conventions of the *shilpashastra* or art treatises which specified the details of the iconography, attributes, stance and proportions of the deities, their vehicles etc. Despite these fixed rules, the early Khmer sculptures dating to the pre-Angkorean period whether they are Hindu or Buddhist, reveal styles that already had a stamp of the local artistic tradition, which continued even after the Angkor period<sup>21</sup>. Rawson (1967, p. 18) notes that “It is

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<sup>21</sup>It is possible that earlier images were made out of perishable materials like wood which would have allowed the artists to evolve their technique resulting in the high level of sophistication and finesse of the stone images which are the earliest surviving example of Khmer art. Helen Ibbitson Jessup (2004, p. 30–31) mentions the existence of a set of wooden images unearthed at a site in Vietnam which would have been in the erstwhile Funan region. Although

obvious that their [Khmer] style is not purely Indian; there are elements in it which were never created by Indian sculptors in India, and which must only be called local". The earliest surviving stone images are of Hindu deities and dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Emma Bunker and Douglas Latchford (2004, p. 9) have suggested that the Khmers developed their own unique dress and iconography for these deities, many of whom were possibly pre-existing local gods and goddesses but in Indic garb. The union of an ancestor and a deity in a single image is a Khmer rather than Indian tradition (Bunker and Latchford, 2004, p. 10). Examples include the group of deities installed at Lolei by Yasovarman, that also commemorated his ancestors<sup>22</sup>.

Images that represented both gods and ancestors was not only a Khmer tradition but also appear to have existed in Indonesia. Fontein (1990, p. 45) comments that the Javanese kingdoms dated between the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century seemed to have mentally and physically distanced themselves from examples of Indian art despite the frequent maritime connections between the two regions. According to Fontein there was only occasional evidence of new inflow of ideas from India and that "religions, traditions, and literature that had been adopted earlier were now subjected to a thorough process of progressive Javanization". Klokke (2003, p. 24) comments that religion in Java also underwent transformations at this time with the merging of Buddhism and Hinduism resulting in the combination of Siva and Buddha as two separate and equal paths to salvation but within a single overall system. Deification of kings and queens was also expressed artistically, in Saivite or Buddhist deities. The

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the Carbon-14 dating for the images are inconclusive, Jessup suggests that they could date to the 6<sup>th</sup> century if not earlier, and could reveal the development of carving techniques resulting in the spectacular stone images of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>22</sup>Jacobsen (2008, pp. 49–50).

belief was that kings and queens had divine origins and after death they reunited with the god whose incarnation they had been. In their memory, images representing both the god and the royal personage were donated to temples. Klokke (2003, p. 25) argues that ancestor worship was part of the local religious fabric that syncretized with Hindu beliefs and therefore the “image representing deified forms of kings and queens no longer conformed to Indian iconographic prescriptions but combined attributes of various gods”<sup>23</sup>.

The fact that art and architecture were frequently utilized to articulate local political ideas is attested by two unique examples from the Angkor period, the Harihara image and the reliefs at Angkor Wat. The image of Harihara, a composite deity fusing together Siva and Vishnu into two distinct halves of one image was very popular during the pre-Angkorean period in Cambodia. Paul Lavy (2003) has argued that the image of Harihara fused together two different styles of rule; the rulers of north-central Cambodia who were predominantly Saivite also invoked Vishnu, a popular deity in southern Cambodia reflecting the ambitions of these rulers to impose their authority in these parts. The Harihara images that combined Siva and Vishnu represented these political desires. In a literal sense too, the visual representation of Harihara reveals local inflections. The Prasat Andet Harihara (Figure 2.4) with the slender torso, lean musculature, the slightly flexed right hip and left knee and a calm gaze unmistakably reveal the sophistication of the local artistic traditions.

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<sup>23</sup>Lydia Kieven (2003, pp. 38–39) points out that earlier scholarship on these images had suggested that they were portraits of deceased kings and queens. However, these images did not appear to have individual facial features to link them with particular personages. Therefore, more recent research has instead suggested that it is more accurate to name them as “deification images”, meaning that they represented both the deity as well as the king or queen.



Figure 2.4: Harihara, Prasat Andet, Kompong Thom, last quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Jessup, 2004).

The second example is from the fabulous 12<sup>th</sup> century monument Angkor Wat (Figure 2.5). One of the distinguishing features of this temple are the gal-



Figure 2.5: Angkor Wat, early 12<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia.

leries that embrace the monument from four sides with its lavish depictions of scenes from Hindu mythology (for example, the Churning of the Sea of Milk) as well as some “stylized representation of real life” (Figure 2.6 Mabbett and Chandler, 1995, p. 105). Bunker and Latchford (2004, p. 245) suggests that the gallery scenes are not a metaphorical representation of scenes from Suryavarman II’s reign to be read while circumambulating the galleries because of their physical layout and the way in which the scenes are conceived<sup>24</sup>. But Mabbett and Chan-

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<sup>24</sup>The authors explain that the high thresholds break the continuity of the galleries and that the scenes themselves have centripetal compositions and do not read from one end to another. With the main event of any scene located at the center of the representation, it would make it

dlar (1995, pp. 103–105), Wolters (1999, pp. 63–65), Brown (2004), and Bunker and Latchford (2004, p. 245) have commented that its narratives and design address autochthonous practices and beliefs. Wolters (1999, p. 63) has suggested that Angkor Wat uses Indian signifiers to make a local Khmer statement, one into which Indian conventions have receded so comprehensively that they have become largely superficial. As Mabbett and Chandler (1995, p. 103–105) explain, the scale of the monument “with its moats and linked waterways making a significant contribution to the hydraulic resources of the capital district, made it an expression of royal power...”. Another example is the narrative on the southern panel on the western wall which depicts the battle of Kurukshetra, the battle showing the last age of the world. Both in Java and Cambodia, this battle was considered an inauspicious event to be portrayed in art but Wolters (1999, p. 63) argues that at Angkor Wat, this battle was meant to introduce the golden age of Suryavarman II, one that was still in being. It was a statement about the restoration of internal peace with numerous chances for personal achievement. Angkor Wat, “with its wealth of foreign materials” point to the privilege of living in the golden age of Cambodia.

## **2.11 Localizing Indian myths in Southeast Asia**

Much like Wolters argued that the use of Sanskrit in Southeast Asia was in all likelihood utilized to map out local geo-political ideologies, Indian mythological references that found their way into parts of Southeast Asia were also similarly localized, drawing attention to their relevance in these new regions rather than highlighting aspects of religion in India. These localized Indian

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impossible to read it while circumambulating.





Figure 2.6: Churning of the sea of milk depicted at Angkor Wat, Siem Reap, early 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

myths were given an aesthetic expression through art and architecture particularly through the manipulation and incorporation of landscape and geography. This relationship between built form and landscape is also articulated in inscriptions. Pollock's suggestion that Khmer inscriptions for example, are thoroughly comparable to those in India would perhaps be credible if one were to view one's sources (inscriptions, sculpture, monument, landscape, imagery, and so on) as disparate from one another; it would be safe to suggest that the understanding gained from such a perspective would be different from viewing them as an interconnected network, where sometimes the lines between the sources are blurred.

Consider, for example, the importance accorded to water in Cambodia that recently came to light through the findings by Damian Evans et al (2007) and Roland Fletcher et al (2008) Their impressive research highlighted the extensive water management system in Cambodia during the Angkor period. Their work, building on Victor Gouloubew and Bernard-Philippe Groslier's idea of Angkor as a 'hydraulic city' reveals not only the vast network of canals, ponds and lakes but also the astonishing breadth of the Angkor kingdom itself. The importance accorded to natural resources like water and land/territory and the building of monuments to venerate the gods and ancestors believed to be responsible for the kingdom's prosperity are amply attested to in the Sanskrit and Khmer language inscriptions<sup>25</sup>.

Inscriptions also reveal that Khmer kings were actively involved in designing and maintaining this natural resource planning. One particular verse

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<sup>25</sup>The inscriptions examined in Chapter 5 for example, strongly suggest that Indian imagery could be interpreted as addressing the conjoined local significance of water, land, the feminine, territorial might and kingship.



strongly suggests that the king Indravarman commenced some sort of water management plan after his consecration ceremony on a mountain.

VII. After having received the royal power [after consecration at Mount Mahendra which most likely meant Phnom Kulen] he made this promise: “In five days, starting today, I will commence the dig”.

Cœdès 1937, p. 25.

Another example is the magnificent reclining Vishnu which was housed in the West Baray temple, dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. West Baray was an extensive tank measuring 4 miles by 1.4 miles (8 kilometers by 2.2 kilometers) built by Suryavarman I and Udayadityavarman II. It is now believed that its purpose was to preserve water for irrigation purposes when needed. The image of Vishnu found on a small island in the middle of the tank spouted water from the deity’s navel and was mistakenly identified as the Buddha by the Chinese traveler Chou Ta-Kuan when he visited Angkor in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This representation, set in a temple located in the middle of the vast lake, was a depiction of Vishnu sleeping on the ocean; importantly, it was also an explicit and seamless fusion of local religious and economic considerations in Angkorean Cambodia. This becomes even more apparent at Kbal Spean and Phnom Kulen where hundreds of *linga* and *yoni* images and those of the reclining Vishnu and Lakshmi are carved directly onto the bed of the river (Figure 2.7). The waters that flows over these images descend into the Siem Reap valley where the rice fields, palaces and monuments were located, a “living connection between the symbolic cosmic mountain, home of the gods, and the sanctuaries where they are worshipped”<sup>26</sup> (Jessup, 2004, p. 122).

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<sup>26</sup>The religious and economic significance of these images at Kbal Spean will be examined in



Figure 2.7: *Linga* and *Yoni* images at Kbal Spean, Cambodia.

The relationship between landscape and cosmology comes to the forefront in the myths and monuments of Indonesia and Bali. Once again, we return to the myth surrounding the churning of the sea of milk. According to a Javanese version from the Tantu Pangelaran the gods carried Mount Meru (used as a churning stick in the myth) to Java after encircling it with the World Snake (the churning rope). This journey caused the mountains to toss and turn and through its interaction with the plants and trees on it, created holy water. Several pieces of Mount Meru broke off and fell onto the land, forming the mountains of Java. The base of the mountain was placed by the gods in East Java forming Mount Semeru. The jar containing the holy water was deposited in the core of the mountain (Klokke, 2003, p. 26). The Javanese version makes the mountain, and not the ocean, as the source of the holy water. This is not surprising given that East Java is “rich in mountains” (Klokke, 2003, p. 26) and is detail in Chapter 5.

the source for the rivers and springs that feed the rice fields. Perhaps for these reasons, many of the temples dating to the Singasari and Majapahit period in Indonesia are oriented towards mountains, or built directly on mountain slopes. Kieven (2003, p. 31) argues that this aspect was again a combination of both local beliefs of ancestors as well as Hindu notion of Mount Meru, the sanctuary of gods.

Candi Jalatunda was built in 977 C.E. on the western slope of Mount Penanggungan, considered sacred by the Javanese<sup>27</sup>(Figure 2.8). The homes of ancestors, mountains, with their rich soil, periodically (or perhaps unpredictably) releasing floods and violent volcanic action, have been considered sacred in Javanese religion and culture. These sites thus became sacred locations for building monuments, at once combining autochthonous and Hindu beliefs. The volcanic stone used for construction of these monuments and carving the reliefs, might have augmented the sanctity of the structure, since the raw material is directly derived from the mountain itself. The reliefs on this structure depict the story of Udayana from the Mahabharata, and there appears to be an implication that the Indian Udayana (and his Pandava ancestors) were also counted among the ancestors of Javanese kings. Their appearance at the monument, argues Ann Kinney (2003, p. 57), was meant to both sanctify it and legitimize the kings of East Java. Andaya (2006, p. 56) quotes Petrus Zoetmulder when he vehemently argued that although Javanese literature may attribute Sanskrit names

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<sup>27</sup>Jalatunda consists of a rectangular basin enclosed by walls on four sides with a tall back wall. There are two smaller basins on the northeast and southeast corners fed by spouts in the form of a Garuda on the left and a naga on the right. An elevated terrace extends out onto the main basin from the center of the tall wall and functions as the base for a fountain shaped like 9 linga-like pillars surrounded by a snake. Water was fed through the wall and into the fountain which then fell into the main basin through spouts which are decorated with reliefs.

to places and people, those characters themselves “are essentially Javanese, acting like Javanese, thinking Javanese and living in a Javanese environment”.



Figure 2.8: Candi Jalatunda, 977 C.E., East Java (Kinney et al., 2003).

The various elements elaborated in the discussion above—Sanskrit inscriptions, Hindu mythological references, Hindu images—are again “loan words” that could be traced back India but once they departed from Indian shores, they ceased to belong to the Indian world. Here in Southeast Asia, they became incorporated in their unique ways into the autochthonous political and cultural landscape.

## 2.12 Pervasive presence of the feminine in Khmer cultural lexicon

The final aspect of Pollock's Sanskrit cosmopolis that will be discussed in this chapter is the presence of the feminine in Khmer inscriptions. Pollock (2006, p. 126) has rightly pointed out that the prominence accorded to the feminine from the first to the last Sanskrit-language inscription in Cambodia is a distinguishing factor from its Indian counterparts. Nevertheless, he continues that this is also a "localism" that should not be accorded too much importance since, in character, substance and form, Khmer inscriptions are no different from the Indian ones. I suggest, however, that this local phenomenon, i. e. the ubiquitous presence of the feminine contributed substantially and critically to the political culture of Cambodia. This is compellingly articulated both visually, literally, through myths and performance traditions that *together*, constitute the local political landscape. The following chapters in this dissertation will elaborate on these various aspects through which the political, religious and economic significance of the feminine is highlighted in Cambodia. Therefore in this chapter, I will only present broad outlines with a few illustrative examples not only from Cambodia but other parts of Southeast Asia underscore heterogeneous nature of the Sanskrit cosmopolis.

Andaya (2007, p. 114) has noted that historians suggested the "high status" of women as a regional characteristic of Southeast Asia. Some of these authors include Coedès (1944), Vickery (1998) and Reid (1988). The Chinese visitor Chou Ta-Kuan who came to Cambodia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century had also commented on the business acumen of the local women. Nevertheless, Andaya (2007, pp. 114–115)

has noted that for a long time, historiographies that focus on warfare or political leadership “is destined to exclude or marginalize women” because the focus is primarily around male-centric activities and where written sources privilege the masculine; aspects relating to women are relegated to the footnotes, or assigned to a separate section or appendix of the main narrative. Reid (1988) has shown that several early sources from different parts of Southeast Asia contain references to the active participation of women in trade, warfare, diplomacy, literature and the arts. Further, he also notes that there are records from the 13<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries mentioning that divorce was not uncommon in parts of Southeast Asia, and that there was no social stigma attached to remarriage. De Casparis (1981, p. 147) wrote that early inscriptions frequently mentioned women who played the role of negotiators. Reid (1988, p. 637) also mentions the Trung sisters of northern Vietnam who fought against the Chinese in 43 C. E. Balinese inscriptions contain a few references to financial transactions of wealthy women that includes religious patronage (Andaya, 2007, p. 119).

### **2.12.1 Visual presence of the feminine in Southeast Asia**

Apart from the obvious religious significance, goddess images and imagery in art and inscriptions often had political connotations. Reminiscent of the political implications of the Harihara image referred to earlier, the goddess Bhagavati was worshipped as the protector of the southern provinces while Siva as Bhadreshwara was venerated at Mi-son in central Vietnam<sup>28</sup>. As mentioned earlier, royal women were sometimes venerated or commemorated as ancestors

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<sup>28</sup>Bhagavati may have had special ritual and political importance for the Cham, as it was looted by the Khmer during a war. See 3.

in the guise of Hindu and Buddhist goddesses. Bunker and Latchford (2004, pp. 100–101) suggests that an early 9<sup>th</sup> century image identified as Lakshmi and a Vishnu image from the same location, may have also represented a deceased royal couple. Several Khmer inscriptions mention that Khmer kings installed images of gods and goddesses that also commemorated their deceased parents, fusing together Sanskritic and autochthonous ancestral beliefs. Such acts would secure the well-being of the king and his kingdom. Goddess images might have also represented local political trends and events; much like the colossal sculptures and architecture of the Koh Ker period might denote the political aspirations of the ambitious Jayavarman VI, so too a Durga image has been cited by Bunker and Latchford (2004, p. 134) as epitomizing the king's militant spirit. According to Bunker and Latchford, the extraordinary Durga image (now part of the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago) epitomized the king's militant spirit. "Bristling" with weapons, and having just killed the buffalo-demon, this image is a strong contrast to earlier gentler images of the goddess, for example, from the pre-Angkor period; they also point out that the female images of the Koh Ker period "were substantial with good firm bodies...not graceful young girls".

The walls of Angkor Wat are adorned with numerous *apsara* images (Figure 2.9), portrayed as dancers as they emerge out of the churning sea. Perhaps like dancers, these goddesses represented the connection between the human world and that of the ancestors, their presence on this stupendous royal monument symbolizing their intimate link to political and economic power<sup>29</sup>

One of the more interesting group of images that have been dated to the late

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<sup>29</sup>The connection between dance, political, economic and ritual power is discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 6.





Figure 2.9: *Apsara* emerging out of the churning sea of milk, Angkor Wat, Siem Reap, early 12<sup>th</sup> century.



9<sup>th</sup> century are those presumed by some scholars like Rawson (1967, p. 52) and B. Ph. Groslier (cited in Heitmann, 2005) to represent the king Indravarman (877–889 C.E.) and his two wives in the guise of Siva, Uma and Ganga. The group consists of three images, one large central male image flanked by two smaller female images. The striking feature of this group is the carving of each of the goddess's hands on the back of the thighs of the male image (Figure 2.10) in a familiar and endearing gesture. The Bakong inscription mentions that the king Indravarman installed an image of Lord Umagangapatisvara whose buttocks were entwined by the arms of Uma and Ganga<sup>30</sup> (Cœdès, 1937, p. 35). Rawson (1967, p. 52) and Heitmann (2005) both comment on the size of the central male figure of the king/Siva, dwarfing the two female figures suggesting that the hierarchic arrangement reflected the Khmer concept of kingship. However the strategic placing of the hands of the queens/Uma-Ganga on the thighs of the king in a subtle gesture of support implies a nuanced relationship between the images than what Rawson and Heitmann suggest. Further, these three images were sculpted out of a single stone, suggesting their indissoluble links to each other. Could this be an evocation of the significance of the feminine in Khmer religion and politics? Whether Khmer society was matrilineal, matriarchal, cognatic or other<sup>31</sup> maybe be hard to determine but it is undeniable that there was considerable focus on the feminine in inscriptions, art and myth during the Angkorean period. Therefore the diminished size of the female images notwithstanding, the linking of the queens/Uma-Ganga to the king/Siva

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<sup>30</sup>The placing of the female's hands on the leg/thigh of the male was repeated in other representations too, for example in the Vishnu and Lakshmi images at Kbal Spean in Chapter 5, which I suggest could indicate how intimacy and eroticism was portrayed in Khmer art.

<sup>31</sup>Apart from Wolters' theory about cognatic kinship in Wolters (1999), Judy Ledgerwood (1995) discusses the validity of the theory of matriarchy and matriliney in Khmer kinship.

of Bakong could also be viewed as a statement of the significance of the feminine to kingship.

The Indian presence in the political and visual language that emerges from the Khmer sources is undeniable but at the same time, the forces stimulating them seem firmly anchored in the local landscape.

## **2.13 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have tried to critically assess the character of Pollock's Sanskrit cosmopolis that he suggests spread from India onto to various parts of Southeast Asia, including Cambodia and Indonesia. Pollock makes it clear that he is only examining the broad generalities and not the particularities of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, his suggestion that the Sanskritic literary aesthetic helped to create/articulate a universal political culture in both India and Southeast Asia is not without problems. Literary and visual sources are often intimately linked and inform each other; further, even if they do use Sanskritic words and imagery, they most likely were utilised to highlight the myriad local concepts, beliefs and interests. Pollock acknowledges the pervasive presence of the feminine in Khmer inscriptions, but says that its importance should not be exaggerated. Once again, visual and literary evidence strongly suggest that the feminine was a critical component of the local political culture. As I have argued earlier, one of the reasons for Pollock's suggestion that Khmer inscriptions are thoroughly comparable with their Indian counterparts could be the result of treating one's sources as unconnected to each other. How one "reads" one's sources is guided by historical context as well as philosophical and method-

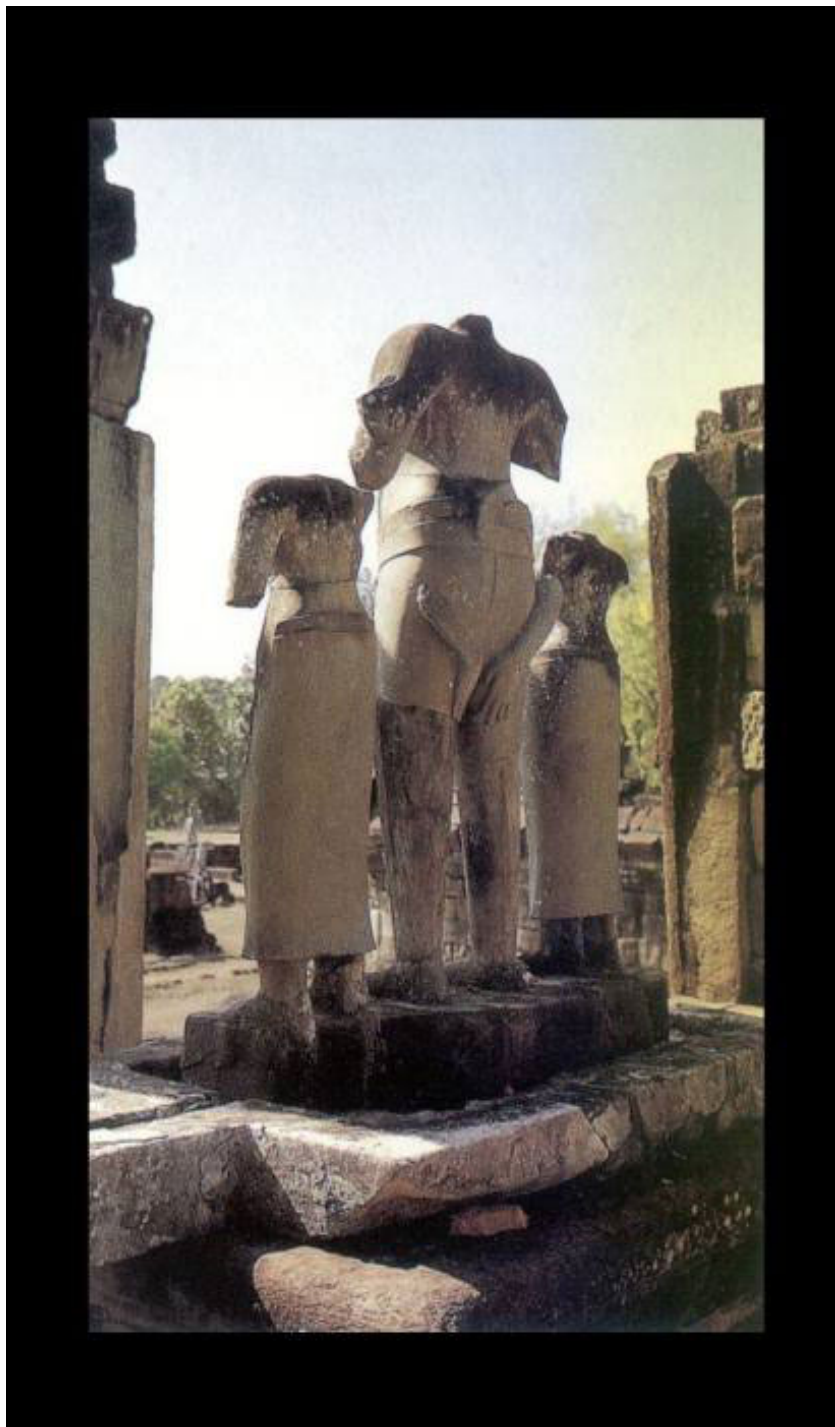


Figure 2.10: Umagangapatisvara, undated, Bakheng, Cambodia. <http://www.webcitation.org/5ugyriw8w>

ological predilections. The following chapter explores the trajectory of the historiography of Angkorean Cambodia and examines why, for the most part, this historiography treated the significance and status of the feminine as peripheral while focusing on the masculine aspects of kingship, economy and religion.

## CHAPTER 3

### LOCATING THE GODDESS IN COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

#### 3.1 Introduction

Continuing the theme from the previous chapter, I discuss the ways in which primary sources were used in Khmer historiography that was compiled during the colonial period. Although the roots of colonial philosophy could date back a century or more, I have chosen to focus primarily on literature dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards from which time France began to tighten their political control over Cambodia. The history of Cambodia was compiled for the Western world by a group of writers consisting of government officials, historians, architects, travel writers and novelists. These writers had at their disposal various sources that included images, monuments, myths, travel accounts and contemporary religious practices that likely had roots in antiquity. The restoration of ancient monuments, writing of Cambodia's history and showcasing it to the world by way of exhibitions, museums and expositions were closely tied with the building of the colonial project itself. The various narratives that were composed during this time provide a range of perspectives on the ancient history of Cambodia and also on the academic or philosophic predilections of the writers themselves. While the academic writings sought a "scientific" study of their subjects on hand, some of the more imaginative compositions appeared to bring in a sense of vitality to the past. The reason for their respective views was in part due to the manner in which these writers viewed their sources. In the academic compilations, sources such as monuments, images and inscriptions were isolated from the landscape and the people who interacted with them,

even as the primary sources suggested otherwise. Only a few, including some novelists and artists, traced continuities between the various receptacles of history. In their effort to build the political history of Cambodia, the colonial scholars focused almost exclusively on masculine aspects of Khmer history and art, thereby relegating the feminine to the margins. This chapter critically examines a selection of writings, both academic and non-academic and the various contributing factors that influenced their respective narratives.

### **3.2 French colonial historiography on Khmer art**

Travelogues and other forms of non-academic writing preceded the more institutionalized research on Khmer art. These early accounts contain the authors' impressions about the people, land and culture and were examples of the cultural blue-prints, which, in many ways, were also reflected in the subsequent academic scholarship by colonial writers.

Charles Emile Bouillevaux was one of the early French Catholic missionaries who penned the memoirs of his travels and experiences in Cambodia and Vietnam. His account reveals his curiosity about the people and respect for them. There is also a degree of amusement at some of their customs and attitudes and unfortunately a narrow-mindedness which betrays, perhaps to some extent, his moralistic religious stance. Perhaps typical of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionary, Bouillevaux did not comprehend the religious mores and practices of the locals which he proceeded to describe in slightly mocking tones, even suggesting that the priests themselves did not understand the prayers which they recited at the temples. To Bouillevaux, the reverence of the indigenous

people of nature and their belief in local spirits and gods seemed typically characteristic of a backward, superstitious culture and one of the primary reasons for their degenerative country. He stated that Cambodia had “plunged into the darkness of paganism” (Bouillevaux, 1874, p. 79), a view that was repeated by other European visitors to Cambodia such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century French naturalist and explorer Henri Mouhot. Describing the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat, Bouillevaux expressed his appreciation of the architecture but regarded the sculptures as being grotesque.

Although Bouillevaux’s account was published earlier, it was Henri Mouhot’s later travelogue on Cambodia that captured the imagination of people in Europe. In the introduction to his diary, Mouhot is proclaimed as the person who “rediscovered the ancient Khmer civilization for the western world”<sup>1</sup> However, it is also mentioned later in the book that there were Europeans who had visited Cambodia earlier who also wrote about their experiences, including their descriptions of the monuments. The epithet bestowed on Mouhot was also contested by Bouillevaux whose book was published earlier. Mouhot’s account gained much publicity in Europe perhaps in part due to his untimely and tragic death during his travels in Laos in 1861. Mouhot was a French Protestant whose journey to Southeast Asia was sponsored by the Royal Geographical Society in England. The Society’s charter stated that geographical research was to be helped by the collection and publication of ‘explorers’ logs’ like those of Mouhot. This collection along with relevant maps was to be installed in a library, and was also to serve as information for other prospective explorers. Pym (1966, p xx), who edited Mouhot’s book mentions that the main purpose of Mouhot’s travels to Southeast Asia was natural history and that his speci-

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<sup>1</sup>Pym (1966, p. xi).

men and collections became the subject of study of many entomologists. Pym also claimed that Mouhot's travels inspired other naturalists and explorers to embark on journeys to Southeast Asia.

Mouhot's descriptions of the Khmers were not markedly different from his contemporary Bouillevaux. Mingled with his fascination for the natural history of Cambodia, curiosity and admiration for its people are the usual stereotypical observations about the 'decadent Orient'. Mouhot met with the Cambodian king a few times during his stay and described his appearance as "good-natured, mild and intelligent", his portrayal of the king surrounded by women, one of whom was pretty and the others "fat... with vulgar features"<sup>2</sup> suggested a picture of eccentricity and debauchery. His impression of the people was that they were mostly undisciplined, untrustworthy, highly superstitious and having no scientific bent of mind. The descriptions and comments made by both Bouillevaux and Mouhot bring to mind Ronald Inden's Inden (2000, p. 86) critique of the metaphor of the sponge used to describe Hinduism. Inden explains that the metaphor (indicating what the historian Percival Spear called a 'mysterious amorphous entity') denotes a lack of 'world-ordering rationality'. Furthermore, Inden suggests that Hinduism is portrayed as a female presence, "who is able, through her very amorphousness and absorptive powers, to baffle and perhaps even threaten Western rationality, clearly male in this encounter". In other words, as much as there is a depiction of the Other as deficient and irrational, there is also a fear of being engulfed by that very same irrationality. An example is Mouhot's vivid description of his scientific expedition through the land to collect various specimen (which he found fascinating in and of itself): clearing and taming the bushes and plants which obstruct his path, constantly

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<sup>2</sup>Pym (1966, p. 35).



in peril of being attacked by strange animals, reptiles and humans.

Apart from natural history, Mouhot was also awe-struck by the architectural marvels of Cambodia. His writings reveal his profound admiration for the monuments. Nevertheless, the only two monuments he discussed in detail were Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. His descriptions, he said, were aimed “to draw the attention of Eastern *savants* to a new scene” (Pym, 1966, p. 84). It is remarkable that even though his account included numerous details about the various bas-reliefs, architectural details and proportions, there was no mention of the one outstanding feature of the monument: the thousands of *apsara* and *devata* images sculpted all over its walls. Even his description of the Churning of the Sea of Milk does not allude to the *apsara* figures. Mouhot’s diary and other literature on Cambodia as well as an increasing control by the French colonial machinery ushered in a new chapter into the manner on which Cambodia’s past was investigated: institutionalized research.

### **3.3 Setting up the institutional framework for the study of Khmer history**

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French had taken administrative control over most parts of Cambodia. The building of roads made the more far-flung areas of the country more accessible, especially those who were interested in seeking out the more inaccessible temples and monuments. Simultaneously, the interest and curiosity generated in France about other cultures, namely those of India, Egypt and Southeast Asia led to the creation of institutions like the Musee Guimet and the Ecole Francaise d’Extreme Orient (EFEO) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and

early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The French began a systematic study of Khmer history and culture through the efforts of archaeologists and historians working for these institutions. George Groslier, Henri Parmentier, Henri Marchal, George Coedes, L.P. Briggs and Eveline Poree-Maspero were some of the few scholars associated with these institutions whose selected works will be examined below.

George Groslier was a French archaeologist who later went on to become the Director of the Phnom Penh Museum. He published numerous articles and books on Khmer art and architecture. Groslier greatly appreciated Khmer architectural planning and sculpture and meticulously studied the structural details of the monuments. He praised the architectural dimensions of Angkor Wat but declared that the sculptures and bas-reliefs were distracting. Groslier's preferential view is not unlike those of James Ferguson and E. B. Havell who, writing in the Indian context, also deplored the use of sculptural forms on South Indian temples. Havell commented that art on South Indian temples "vibrates with intense creative energy; yet it lacks neither coherency nor self-restraint. Then, as in a forest choked with undergrowth, it gradually runs riot in a maze of elaboration and pedantic artifice"<sup>3</sup>. Inden (2000, p. 118) inferred that, to these European scholars, it appeared as though the mind that was capable of building these monuments was not able to distinguish the symbol from its referent.

Groslier's focus on Khmer art and architecture revolves almost exclusively around the masculine: for example, in the Bayon bas-reliefs, he focuses on elements that are related to the king's court, the royal entourage, the battles waged by the monarch and his weapons (Groslier, 1924, p. 116). Groslier's descriptions suggest that the masculine and feminine (body) were situated on a ranking scale with the former accorded a dominant status over the latter. As Grosz (1994, p.

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Inden (2000, pp. 118–119).

3) points out, such arguments indicates that the secondary term, in this case the feminine, is a fall from grace of the first term; the body “is thus what is not the mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term”. Nevertheless Groslier observed that the feminine was not only related to things of a frivolous nature; he wrote a very brief note on the role of women in Khmer politics, for example, the wife of king Rajendravarman and some other women who had held positions as judges in the Angkor period. He noted that had he had time, he would have also included the observations of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Chinese traveler Chou Ta-kuan who, Groslier mentions, did not care much about the intellectual aptitude of Khmer women (Groslier, 1924, p. 120).

Henri Parmentier first joined the EFEO as an architect. When the Siem Reap and Battambang provinces came under French control in 1908, Parmentier began work on the Angkor monuments, many of which were located in these two provinces. In 1914 he took over as the head of the archaeology department and later became the director of the EFEO. Parmentier’s definition of the relationship between India and Cambodia offers an interpretation of his reaction to Khmer art. In his book *Angkor* he suggested that the autochthonous population of Cambodia were “civilized” by Indians (Parmentier, 1950, p. 7). He pointed out early in his book that although the Khmer received their “artistic impulse” from India, this was modified by the locals to suit their specific demands (*ibid*). Parmentier made a comparison between the Vedic populace in India and their esoteric religion (which he deemed was essentially foreign to India) and the “impure and vile” indigenous people whom the former kept separated through the caste system (Parmentier, 1950, p. 9). Similarly, he made a distinction between the local population in Cambodia which was transformed and civilized by the imported Indian civilization. Henri Marchal was also a French archaeol-

ogist and member of the EFEO who was appointed curator of Angkor in 1916, a position he held until 1953 (Boisselier and Griswold, 1972, pp. 1–7). Marchal's guide to the monuments of Angkor drew from the works of scholars including Etienne Aymonier, Louis Finot, George Coedes, Henri Parmentier and George Groslier. Some of these authors were contemporaries of Marchal, and several of his views on the “degeneracy” of the locals, tracing the ancestral roots of the Khmers to India and the outsourcing of Khmer art and religion from India were theories propounded and accepted by these scholars at the time<sup>4</sup>. With regard to art, he suggested that Indian art was “reacted upon” by “aboriginal” elements from Cambodia which has lent Khmer art its originality (Marchal, 1930, p. 10).

It is reasonable to speculate that Parmentier was familiar with the European perspective on the Indo-Aryan vs. Dravidian/Other distinction which he may have applied to the Khmer context as well. This could be the reason why he (and other French scholars) chose such elements which, according to them revealed philosophical or glorious facets and ignored those like the erotic and feminine which they might have identified as the local, corrupting elements. On the subject of the divine feminine, Parmentier (1950, p. 10) identified the *sakti* of each of the male gods as their higher source of thought and energy but he did not elaborate on this in his discussion. Like many of his British counterparts in India, Parmentier identified the central *vimana* as the most important section of a Hindu temple where the idol of the male god was placed. Similarly, he found the sculptural elements simply as decorative and excessive, preferring to focus mostly on the architectural aspects.

Groslier also appeared to view the bas-reliefs and sculptures, including female images on temples, as somewhat diversionary. In many descriptions of

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<sup>4</sup>Marchal (1930, pp. 7–10)

Angkor Wat, the 2000-odd *apsara* images are viewed as ornamentation<sup>5</sup>. This is underscored by his reference to an inscription which describes Angkor Wat as resembling the abode of Indra<sup>6</sup> because of the images depicting music and singing as well as those of the dancers (Groslier, 1924, pp. 114–115). Therefore the feminine presence in Angkor Wat is suggested as being decorative elements that are the ultimately for the viewing pleasure of their male admirers. For example, when describing these goddess images, he called them “objects of desire”<sup>7</sup>. At another instance, his description bordered on voyeurism when he said “They tremble anew today, stretch the suppleness of their limbs... the dances of the bas-reliefs continue under our eyes” (ibid). On the other hand, his description also has a performative element (whether intended or not), imagining the dance movements of the deities<sup>8</sup>. Colonial authors seem to be disconcerted over what they viewed was an incongruity between sensuous and decorative imagery on temples and the more “rational” and analytical aspects of the monuments such as the architectural details.

Jessica Rawson in her book *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon* (1984) has pointed out that since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ornament has been criticized as superficial, vulgar and even immoral, and equated with primitivism<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>For example, see (Groslier, 1924, p. 94).

<sup>6</sup>Indra is believed to be the king of the Indo-Aryan gods. Many of the hymns of the Rig Veda are dedicated to him (Dallapiccola, 2002). The appearance of new cults relegated Indra to a secondary position in the Hindu pantheon (Dallapiccola, 2002). In Khmer art, he is depicted seated on a single or three-headed elephant and is positioned over lintels and doorways.

<sup>7</sup>(Groslier, 1924, p. 114).

<sup>8</sup>At another instance, Groslier (1924, pp. 119-120) appears to describe a visual representation at Angkor Wat featuring female musicians. He imagines the women with their hair glistening with oil, gem-laden jewelry and the heavy scent of sandalwood wafting from them. He describes the images (and women?) as enigmatic and beautiful but also “slow and reptilian”.

<sup>9</sup>For a detailed discussion on possible reasons for the bias against ornament in Western

Ornamentation on ancient and medieval architecture, as Gombrich (1984, p. 17) and Rawson (1984, p. 21) pointed out, was subsequently considered by many as obfuscatory elements that prevented one from true reflection. Western ornamentation itself was cast out because they were viewed as lacking in didactic content and unimportant. Therefore an intellectual person would opt for the “sober and rational”. As Gombrich suggests, it is perhaps unlikely that a contemporary member of the society would have criticized an ornate Indian temple or a Gothic cathedral, because it would have been considered most appropriate for the power of the sacred to be demonstrated by pomp, splendor and richness. Gombrich (1984, pp. 18–19) argued that restraint and simplicity were the aesthetic ideals of Western art, a sensibility that could be traced back to ancient Greece<sup>10</sup> where the opinion was that decoration and flourish concealed a base purpose and therefore, ornamentation (in speech or art) “was not only a wasteful indulgence, it was an offence against reason”. Not only that, it was considered an “unnecessary offence” since rationality was believed to be a thing of beauty itself. Rawson (1984, p. 21) suggests that in the West, art was expected to have a message, it was meant to have a reference to the real world or to specific ideas. Sparse or no decorative elements in art would therefore allow the audience to focus on this message without distraction. Furthermore, Rawson (1984, *ibid*) argues that the Western audience, used to certain types of decorative elements in their own architecture, could have been jolted out of their sense of familiarity when confronted with something (non-Western) that they could not relate to. Not only that, over-decoration was considered by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian thinking, see Rawson (1984, pp. 19–22).

<sup>10</sup>Gombrich (1984, p. 20) noted that although one tends to trace what is termed functionalist aesthetics to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the case for beauty as simplicity and rationality can be found in Cicero’s writings on oration.

torian critic John Ruskin, as characteristic of an inward-looking, non-Christian civilization (Gombrich, 1984, pp. 45–46). Indian art was condemned by Ruskin on precisely these grounds<sup>11</sup>. Adolf Loos, the Austrian architect, wrote in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that ornamentation is identified with crime, barbarism and “primitive eroticism”. According to Loos, all art is erotic and while the refined transcend this particular aspect, the uncivilized and degenerate succumb to their baser nature and cover their walls with erotic art.

Gombrich (1984, p. 19) had argued that even in Cicero’s writings on the superiority of simplicity, aesthetic and moral issues had become inextricably linked; Cicero had praised the simple beauty of the country girl who wore no make-up, equating it to propriety and “cleanliness”. By contrast, those women who adorned themselves with jewels and other finery could sometimes be perceived as dangerously seductive. Groslier’s and other colonialists’ critical comments on the diversionary function of female images on temples could perhaps be viewed as a moralistic statement of the local culture. During the Neo-classicist period, a “crowded ornament” was identified with feminine tastes<sup>12</sup> (Gombrich, 1984, p. 23). Gombrich suggests that such notions about ornamentation had a deep influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century criticism, which can be perceived in colonial writings on Khmer and Indian art. At least some of the French colonial scholarship

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<sup>11</sup>Ruskin did praise Gothic architecture with its flurry of ornamentation for the mastery of design although he had contempt for their “moral degradation” of its creators.

<sup>12</sup>It is ironic that French architecture came in for criticism for its ornateness from the English architect Christopher Wren. After visiting the Palace of Versailles in 1665, he denounced what he perceived as overly flamboyant colors and decoration. Further, in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany, there seems to have been a reaction against a “corrupt” and “absurd” French style (Gombrich, 1984, pp. 23–24). In a pamphlet dated to 1759, however, the author notes that in France the taste for the decorative had indeed changed to a return to the ancient Greek and Roman style of austere and quiet grandeur.

appears to have also equated the ornamental and the feminine as unimportant, which only served to further assign them to the margins.

Coedès (1911, p. 38) quotes from Etienne Aymonier's book *Cambodge* regarding the deification of kings, queens and other dignitaries, and modeling of statuary with the traits of these personages as a curious feature of ancient Khmer religion. Primarily through inscriptional references, Coedes tries to decipher the cult of revering ancestors as well as dedicating images of living personages by kings and queens. Khmer rulers were believed to contain the essence of Hindu gods, and anthropomorphic and abstract images of gods were created with this idea in mind. Therefore, Coedes suggests that images of gods were also images of (super) humans and were worshipped as such during the Angkor period. Coedès (1911, p. 46) credits this cult to an "ancient Indian idea". Although the examples given by Coedes includes both kings and queens who were identified with gods and goddesses, his analysis of the apotheosis of Khmer rulers pertains almost exclusively to the king-god equation and what that would have revealed in terms of kingship and local religious practices. The role of the feminine in this equation is almost completely ignored<sup>13</sup>. The inscriptional references are more inclusive of the feminine and masculine as being part of the same equation but Coedes focused only on one aspect of the totality.

The purpose of his book *Guide to Angkor*, Marchal claimed, was to point the

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<sup>13</sup>L.P. Briggs in his book *The Ancient Khmer Empire* had mentioned in passing that during a Khmer-Cham war in the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. the Khmer had carried away a golden image of Bhagavati from a temple in Po Nagar and even though they suffered defeat, retained the image. The Cham substituted a stone image in their temple (Briggs, 1951, p. 126). This reference provided Briggs with a golden opportunity to comment on the political significance of seizing the goddess image but he did not elaborate any further.



visitor towards what was worth seeing in the monuments and bas-reliefs. Early in his book, Marchal gives a description of Hindu gods as they are represented in Khmer art. Like his predecessors and contemporaries, Marchal also designated a secondary role to goddesses. For example, despite the wide prevalence of Vishnu and Lakshmi images, Marchal discussed the symbolism of Vishnu while Lakshmi was only mentioned as Vishnu's consort. Similarly, there is no mention of the ever-present *yoni* in relation to the Siva *linga*. *Apsara* and *devata* are referred to as celestial nymphs and dancers; Marchal (1930, p. 64) he described the *apsara* at Angkor Wat as "delicious". For the potential viewers, Marchal selected those reliefs and images that portrayed battles, episodes from the Ramayana surrounding combat and seizing of Sita by Ravana as being noteworthy. He probably stumbled upon a significant discovery when he mentioned that the two 'libraries'<sup>14</sup> in the Banteay Kdei complex contained two goddess images that Marchal claimed were probably the original icons. If this was indeed true, it could have revealed a new and significant aspect of Khmer architectural cosmology but Marchal unfortunately did not follow the line of enquiry much further. Further in his study, he praised the craftsmanship of the Vishnu images sculpted in the "more important" central tower of Prasat Kravan but the images of the three goddesses in the North tower were not even mentioned. In his discussion of Banteay Srei, Marchal talked about the high quality of the sculptural fineness and chose for the viewer those reliefs which he believed were particularly significant. Curiously, neither the prominent dancing Siva nor the Durga images on the east entrance *gopura* were mentioned although those on either

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<sup>14</sup>Many of the Khmer temple complexes included two identical sanctuaries positioned usually in front of the main sanctuaries, opening either to the east or west. These identical buildings were named "libraries" by the French although no written texts were found in them. The purpose of these structures remain a mystery.

sides of this *gopura* were included in his list. When Marchal wrote his book in 1930, the mould of Khmer historiography was already beginning to set, thanks largely to the work of his fellow countrymen. Marchal who acknowledged that his work was inspired by their works did not deviate in any significant manner from established notions which meant that the divine feminine continued to reside in the shadows of colonial scholarship.

George Coedes, one of the most well-known and respected French scholars remains one of the most prolific writers on Southeast Asia. The early part of his career was spent as a member of the EFEO in Hanoi. Later, as the director of the National Library of Thailand, Bangkok, he translated inscriptions from stelae and monuments from all over Southeast Asia <http://www.webcitation.org/5ugyzcqXb>. He later returned to Hanoi to take over the directorship of the EFEO in 1929, a position he held for 17 years (ibid). The extensive legacy of Coedes continues to be a significant source for current scholars of Southeast Asian art, history and culture, particularly the translations of the Khmer inscriptions. Nevertheless, there still remain certain perspectives and theories in his works that are open to debate. In his introduction to *The Making of Southeast Asia*, published in 1962, Coedès (1962, p. v) pointed out that Khmer history written from an European perspective would cause cultural and historical distortions and claimed that his book would rectify such errors. Unfortunately Coedes succumbed to several of the same scholarly prejudices of his time, describing Indochina as the 'India beyond the Ganges' and as simply a canvas on which the Indian and Chinese civilizations were transformed (Coedès, 1966, pp. v–vi). Implied in this definition is the suggestion that Indochina was a passive entity defined primarily by the interactions of two “superior” civilizations, a perspective that was developed by European historiographers but

perhaps partially influenced by ancient Chinese sources that labeled the Khmer, among other uncomplimentary terms, as barbarians.

The history of Indochina was described by Cœdès (1962, pp. 220-221) as the 'history of events' which can be understood in the light of certain aspects such as wars, conquests and internal insurgencies, activities which were portrayed as purely masculine. It is indeed surprising that Coedes did not include the critical presence of the feminine in inscriptions (for example, the 10<sup>th</sup> century Pre Rup inscription) that he himself had translated, into his account. The thrust of Coedes' work was primarily the political history of Cambodia, focusing almost exclusively on the various economic and political activities of its masculine rulers<sup>15</sup>. The succession of kings, political events, battles, irrigation projects and the building of temples were all facets of this history of Cambodia. According to Cœdès (1962, p. 221), the symbol of divine kingship was the *linga*, the phallic symbol of Siva that was consecrated at the temple-mountain, located at the summit of a natural or artificially-created hill. Coedes described the king as the "source and sum of all authority" who recreated the kingdom of Indra (the Hindu god of gods) on earth by building temples that cosmologically depicted this image thus pointing out the ways in which the spiritual and political aspects of Khmer kingship was depicted using local landscape. To reconstruct Khmer history, Coedes cited epigraphy and Chinese documents<sup>16</sup> as the most important

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<sup>15</sup>It is indeed ironic that the chief protagonist of the novel *The Last Concubine* written in 1942 by the Franco-Cambodian writer Pierrette Guesde (who also goes by the name Makhali Phal), Atman, who is the time-travelling daughter of Jayavarman VII writes to Coedes thanking him for his monumental work which has enabled Atman to know her ancestors. See (Edwards, 2007, p. 40).

<sup>16</sup>Many references in Chinese sources on pre-Angkor Cambodia were accepted without questioning its validity or authenticity by the French historians. The writings of the 13<sup>th</sup> century

and reliable sources of information and went on to claim that archaeological evidence as a source can (only) fill in gaps where information is found lacking<sup>17</sup>. As mentioned earlier, his own translations of Khmer inscriptions clearly contained numerous references to the importance of the divine feminine in affording spiritual and political authority to kingship. Coedes' conclusions on ancient Khmer religio-political beliefs did not allude to most of these references.

Coedes did however, acknowledge that the kind of history that remained ignorant about social environment, popular beliefs and customs was only skeletal in nature. One of the rare studies on local customs and rites of Cambodia was compiled by Eveline Poree-Maspero, who was also one of the few women scholars of the colonial period. She was the daughter of Georges Maspero, a colonial administrator. She came to Phnom Penh with her husband Guy Poree, who was the artistic adviser to the Cambodian government at the time. She later became the curator of the Phnom Penh museum from 1941 to 1945. She also authored a book on the customs and habits of the Cambodians in addition to authoring many articles. In 1945, Eveline Poree-Maspero wrote an article on certain local rituals and practices of Cambodia, which mentioned the belief among the local populace that good and evil spirits resided both in them as well as all around them. Poree-Maspero's careful descriptions reveal that women were intimately involved in several rites associated with land and its fecund properties. In her descriptions, Poree-Maspero mentioned that both men and women were

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Chinese traveler Chou Ta-Kuan is the only literary account on the Angkor period, and was an important source for the colonial authors. The highly edited and condensed version contained several significant pieces of information on the importance of the feminine in Khmer religion and culture. These references were sometimes alluded to but not included as integral aspects of Khmer history by the colonial scholars.

<sup>17</sup>See Coedès (1962, p. 74).

involved in many of the rituals like casting out evil spirits from the ill. Similarly, during the ceremony which involved invoking the spirit of the rice cultivation and fields, it appears that in some areas it was a woman who called to the spirits to enter the rice fields (Poree-Maspero, 1945, pp. 155–156), a practice that might have had roots in the Angkor period, if not earlier. For example, several Khmer inscriptions mention Lakshmi/Sri the wife of the god Vishnu as representing land/earth and whose fecund powers had to be earned by the king in order to usher in prosperity for his kingdom. Poree-Maspero's description reveals that there are close similarities between the rites associated with inviting the good spirits to inhabit humans as well as crops. What Poree-Maspero's observations reveal is the interconnections between the animate and inanimate world distinguished by the flow of energies between these seemingly disconnected entities. This particular belief was characterized by the author as a flaw where the locals, acting out of confusion could make no distinction between the the animate and inanimate realms.

Poree-Maspero's view was not unique: many of French colonial scholars did not consider it a legitimate belief of the Khmers that these different realms were linked, although the Khmer inscriptions strongly indicated that the local population envisioned the geographical landscape and its produce in terms of a living entity, endowed with many of the attributes of humans such as life and death and possessing its own agency in its relationship to humans<sup>18</sup>. This belief

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<sup>18</sup>In Bali for example, there is the belief that geographical landmarks such as mountains and river are inhabited by spirits (benevolent and malevolent) who also interact with humans. The boundaries between the spirits and the material world are so porous that the latter sometimes takes on the characteristics of the former. For example, Wiener (1995, p. 46) notes that in the province of Klungkung, there is a site of confluence of three rivers called Tri Sakti which is the name of the divinity that manifests itself in the form of the three gods, Wisnu, Iswara and

seemed to be closely connected also in the manner in which monuments were related to their geographical location. In the effort to reconstruct the history of Cambodia through a “rational” and “scientific” process, the writers reduced the monuments and images on them to a set of lines, blueprints and figures, shearing them from the landscape to which these monuments seemed to share an intimate and symbiotic relationship. As Edwards (2007, p. 26) notes, in their effort to homogenize the history of Cambodia, the colonial writers disconnected the legends and multiplicity of meanings from its past<sup>19</sup>. In the Indian context, Inden (2000, pp. 87–88) notes that Indologists writing in the colonial period were probably influenced or guided by the view that the world was governed by a rationality produced by natural philosophy or a deist image of the universe. Consequently their understanding of the human world was also dictated by the Brahma. Accordingly, the waters of one of the rivers is dark and flows from the north, Wisnu’s direction; the Masih river is cloudy white and flows from the east, Iswara’s direction and Unda is reddish and comes from the south, both attributes of Brahma.

<sup>19</sup>Edwards (2007, pp. 24–29) comments that the French colonial scholars and writers also began to project Angkor Wat as a monument of Khmer nationhood. This engagement with creating a national history of Cambodia with its accompanying signifiers like temples and monuments and the creation of public museums displaying objects that embodied “national” attributes, she argues, was “deeply enmeshed with Europe’s growing preoccupations with national identity”. Their own anxieties of “social and national entropy” was extended to the colonies and fueled the trend towards conservationism both in France and her colonies. Therefore cultural products of regions like Cambodia and museums set up by France that show-cased the efforts of conservation underscored the commitment to preservation and national education. Marchal, for example, remarked that it was due to the great efforts of the French that the unique Angkor monuments were rescued and earned their place as some of the greatest monuments of the world. World fairs and exhibitions also became an effective canvases to display the host country’s power. These exhibitions containing extravagant arrays of cultural objects and scholarly accomplishments also instigated competitions among the colonial powers like Britain and France.

same philosophy. Inden explains that those principles of organization include “mutual exclusion, unity, centredness, determinacy, and uniformity”. In such a universe, everything is ordered and stable and “single events can be explained by single causes”. While Inden’s comments pertained to Indologists, they appear to be relevant to some of the colonial scholars of Cambodia as well<sup>20</sup>. This might, in part, explain the unwillingness of scholars like Poree-Maspero to consider alternate world-views such as those suggested in the Khmer cultivation rituals, which appear to confound Western notions of cause and effect and a stable, uniform world-order.

Poree-Maspero’s reaction to the practice of the local religion is not dissimilar to the early scholars of Indian Buddhism who placed texts as the most important source for their study, relegating archaeology and epigraphy to a distant second place<sup>21</sup>. As Schopen (1997, p. 2) points out, it was assumed by these scholars that the texts were known to the majority of practicing Buddhist but also that these texts alone described actual practices. But proof of these assumptions is never presented. The focus of colonial historiography was mainly to reconstruct the political history, and to a lesser degree the social life of the Khmers. Studying the interconnectedness of monument, landscape and people could actually have revealed more about the practice of religion itself which was largely ignored by the colonial scholars. Schopen’s remark on the effect of scholarship that favored textual sources and ignored material (and participatory) evidence is pertinent to the present discussion. He wrote: “it... effectively excludes what practicing Buddhists did and believed from the history of their own religion”

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<sup>20</sup>According to Inden, these views of the Indologists could have been influenced by deism, a philosophy that was popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in present day United Kingdom, France, Ireland and some other regions.

<sup>21</sup>See Schopen (1997, pp. 1–14).

(Schopen, 1997, p. 9). Quoting from a text on Buddhism whose author implies that the real Buddhism is only textual Buddhism, Schopen comments that the conclusion of the author is that “knowledge based on actual behavior is not adequate”. This favoritism for formal, “real” religious doctrines elaborated in texts, Schopen argues, is rooted in Western intellectual tradition, in particular the Christian tradition. Through a selection of writings on the history of Christianity<sup>22</sup>, Schopen (1997, pp. 9–12) argues that those authors also stated that “real” Christianity could only exist in texts and that the contribution of human behavior in the history of Christianity falls outside the purview of the historian who studies Christianity; those aspects need to be relegated “to the realm of popular religious practice”. It is safe to assume that given the lack of literature from the Angkor period, the French colonial scholars may have relied on Indian texts on Hinduism to understand religion in Cambodia which would thereby prevent them from understanding how religion was practiced in Cambodia. Nevertheless, as more formal scholarship tended to ignore, and perhaps hesitate to acknowledge, the vital connections between animate and inanimate worlds in Khmer religious practices, imaginative writing in the form of travelogues and fiction, ventured to articulate them.

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<sup>22</sup>Schopen suggests that the methodological position of Buddhist scholars and historians resembles that of many early Protestant reformers who were striving to establish the focus of Christianity on scripture and not on outward manifestations of religion. See Schopen (1997, p. 13) and references within. Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, for example, openly decried images as unimportant aspects of religion, choosing instead to elevate the spiritual aspects of the scriptures above everything else. Schopen, however, also mentions that the influence of 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant thought is perhaps only one reason for the assumptions of Buddhist scholars. He also points out that such assumptions are also evident, for example, in the writings of the Indian reformer Rajarammohan Roy who criticized idol worship.



### 3.3.1 Imaginative literature on Cambodia

Edward Said (1979) wrote that “imaginative” literature<sup>23</sup> had an important role to play in the construction of “Orientalist” notions. Apart from the scholarly writings on Cambodia, travelogues, novels and semi-academic jottings not only offer insights about the land and people but are interesting because their opinions are somewhat unfettered by demands to be “logical”. Early writings such as those by Mouhot containing vivid descriptions of the “lost” temples of Cambodia, hidden away in the jungles captured the imagination of many subsequent writers. Some of these novels could be guilty of overly exoticizing the “Orient”, creating an unrealistic and fantastic image of the country, its culture and people. While this may be true, the novelists who were not held back by the need to be systematic and exact, recorded elements that appealed to their imagination and in doing so, offered glimpses of the local cultures which are valuable. One such work was *A Pilgrimage to Angkor* written by the travel writer and “exotic novelist” Pierre Loti. Loti traveled to Cambodia in 1901 at a time when the archaeologists of the EFEO had already cleared the vegetation off most of the monuments, leading to a surge of tourist population to these sites. Loti’s account of his travels and stay in Cambodia, although liberally dosed with poetic license, offers a glimpse into the ways in which Cambodia and its monuments fired the imagination of the French. Loti stayed at Angkor for less than two days, although in his book, he added another imaginary day to his sojourn. His

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<sup>23</sup>Said (1979, pp. 2–3) argued that “Orientalism” was a style of thought put together not only by academic scholarship but also through the imaginings of poets and novelists who created distinctions between the East and West through their stories, epics and travel accounts. According to Said (1979, p. 4) it was way by which the West (primarily Britain and France from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later the US) came to terms with its colonies through various mechanisms which included social descriptions, political accounts, novels and theories.

description of Angkor Wat and the Bayon form the core of his trip to Angkor. Loti (1996, p. 38) also wrote that ancient Cambodia was “civilized” by Indians who subjugated the “timid natives- men with little eyes, worshippers of the serpent” and introduced Hinduism to Cambodia. Loti, who would not be confused with a liberal (at least in his writings) makes certain unflattering descriptions of the people of Vietnam and distinguishes them from the “Aryan”-looking neighbors, the Khmer. Although writing nearly fifty years after Henri Mouhot’s visit to Cambodia, the increasing presence of the French and the infrastructural development of the country, Loti’s description of the land, smells and people (albeit more dramatic) are strikingly similar to Mouhot’s sentiments regarding the remoteness of Cambodia.

While in Siem Reap, Loti visited Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. In the midst of his exoticizing description of the monuments hidden among trees, ferns and creepers, he pauses to describe the carved faces on the Bayon towers. He said: “ They smile under their great flat noses, and half close their eyelids, with an indescribable air of senile femininity, looking like aged discreetly cunning ladies” (Loti, 1996, p. 44). The two kinds of images that caught the attention of Loti at Angkor Wat were the bas-reliefs and the numerous *apsara* and *devata* figures on all levels of the monument to which he alludes several times in his book. He was very appreciative of the beautiful *apsara* figures, thinking in wonderment how the ancient artists had “chiselled and polished their virginal breasts” (Loti, 1996). The novelist Loti’s fanciful description is not very different from the Khmer scholar Groslier’s, made many years later<sup>24</sup>. He dwelt in some length on their costumes, jewelry, headdress, the attributes they hold, hand gestures and facial expressions. It is indeed interesting to note that he used the

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<sup>24</sup>See page 72.

term 'goddess' to describe them, differing from the academic descriptions of the images as decorative elements. Much of the imagery of the architecture and reliefs was undecipherable to Loti (1996, p. 78) who imagined the monuments to proclaim: " We are conceptions forever foreign to you", once again echoing Mouhot's thoughts made decades ago. As he took in his last view of the "warriors, men and women" on the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat, the last image that he left with, he said, was that of the smiling *apsara*. As exaggerated and voyeuristic as Loti's impressions of the imagery might be, it is noteworthy that Loti was among the very few of his time who viewed the images of *apsara* not as objects frozen in stone but as though they came alive to the sound of music, enlivening the monument through their movement. In particular, while he witnessed the dance performance at the palace, Loti superimposed these bedecked dancers to the images on Angkor Wat and through his description and association, brought the monument to life. Like Poree-Maspero who maps rituals, Loti looks to the living performance to animate and make sense of the reliefs. Both of their approaches allow a re-evaluation of the role of the feminine, by linking elements of the present to the past<sup>25</sup>.

British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer's book *Bali and Angkor: a 1930s Pleasure Trip Looking at Life and Death* is neither a purely imaginative work nor is it a strictly academic one but offers yet another insight into the perception of the

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<sup>25</sup>Loti's observation about the reaction of local Parisians to the *apsara* dance is suggestive of what female images on Khmer temples might have depicted for them. He noted that when the Khmer dancers performed at a garden party at the Elysee Palace in 1906, the "blase Parisians" thought the dance to be highly erotic. When Loti witnessed the dance in Cambodia at the palace of King Norodom, he noted that the costume of the dancer, which was modeled after the *apsara* image on Angkor Wat was almost an exact copy of the relief, particularly that the upper body was covered only by a thin net.

feminine form in Khmer art during the colonial period. Gorer, who traveled in parts of Southeast Asia in the 1930s, wrote of his visits to some of the Angkor monuments. In the introduction to his book, Gorer (1986, p. 13) claimed that the the aim of writing the book was to work out for himself “the role of those illogical manifestations, art and religion, in the life of the community”. Like Loti, Gorer was not convinced of the necessity for the colonial presence/interference in Cambodia nor of the “ugly” presence of the “native” Khmer population, though much more disparaging of the latter. Gorer (1986, p. 178) suggested that the Khmer were an “opium-soaked community” and that opium was a necessary factor while properly comprehending Khmer art, particularly its sensual and yet “sexless” images. Gorer (1986, pp. 180-181) said that these images (which he termed as undesired ornamentation) could be viewed with “sensual admiration but with no desire, rather aversion”, and though smiling kindly had an inhuman quality to them.

It has to be pointed out that in comparison with references in British colonial scholarship on Indian art, there are fewer instances in French scholarship where the feminine was labeled as obscene. It is possible that the Khmer images when compared with their Indian counterparts, the former were perhaps found to be less voluptuous and therefore considered less sensual<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, there also emerges a connection between colonial perceptions of local women in literature and their counterparts in stone. This can be observed in British literature on Indian women, as elaborated in Teltscher (1995). Popular literature painted a picture of women in India as being dangerous yet submissive,

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<sup>26</sup>In later scholarship including Vittorio Roveda’s *Khmer Mythology* (2005), this characterization was asserted in his claim that Khmer art was devoid of erotic and sensual imagery altogether.

sexually depraved who performed bizarre sexual rituals in Hindu temples. Although the scholarly writings on the feminine in art did not quite employ the exact terms, the occasional mention of female images as obscene and/or vulgar, the conspicuous absence from debates on the significance of sacred images in religious culture and yet the numerous illustrations of erotic and feminine imagery in E. B. Havell's book (1915) all ultimately reflect Western stereotypes of local women and their femininity. When the colonialists looked at the female images on the temples, they associated them almost exclusively with the erotic and with fertility, again reflecting existing Western notions that the female body was unruly, imperfect and incapable of being subjects of knowledge or philosophy. To them, the female body could never symbolize political power, spiritual power or economic prowess, qualities which were reserved only for the masculine.

These examples selected from both scholarly and non-academic writing have provided a sampling of perspectives on the feminine in Khmer art. Before deconstructing these colonial texts it is necessary to raise a note of caution. In the light of new theoretical developments in the post colonial world, colonial authors and texts have become easy demolition targets. Through their often patronizing tone, at times blatantly racist and sexist orientation, these authors and their scholarship reflected much of the existing philosophical and ideological trends of their times. Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge that their monumental work provided the foundation upon which much of the subsequent advancement in the field was founded. This is not to somehow justify the biases and prejudices present in their works or their role as colonizers, but to point out that a critique of the motivations behind their discourse would be vastly more useful than painting them as villains.

### 3.4 Critiquing colonial French historiography

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, the relationship between the colonizer and colonized, predicated on the connection between knowledge and power determined the framework within which much of the scholarship was compiled<sup>27</sup>. Said (1979, p. 3) wrote that Orientalism was a corporate institution which dealt with the Orient by "...making statements about it, authorizing views on it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it". According to Nicholas Dirks (cited in Cohn, 1996, p. ix), cultural technologies of rule had as much a part in establishing colonial conquest as political power, greater

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<sup>27</sup>Indian writings on Southeast Asia in general also need to be scrutinized under the same political framework but in relation to both Britain and Cambodia. Basa (1998, pp. 396–398) wrote that Indian writings can be classified into three categories: Pre-Nationalist, Nationalist and Post-Nationalist. Pre-Nationalist writings like those of R. G. Bhandarkar (dated to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) stressed the dominating influence of South Indian culture on Cambodia. Writing in the period when British paramountcy was established in India and Indian resistance to it was yet to be formed, Bhandarkar (1889, pp. 9–10) urged Indians to accept the "guidance and leadership" of the "sturdy Anglo-Saxons" and use them as an example to make progress in numerous fields as the Indians had done in the past in Southeast Asia. In the gathering momentum of Nationalism in India, the scholarship of Nationalist writers was directed at instilling a sense of pride in Indian achievements overseas and therefore a rebuttal to the British colonial authority which was implicitly portrayed as an oppressive force. Almost as a rejoinder to the British Empire, Bose (1927, pp. 34–35) wrote that India only established a "cultural empire" in Cambodia; although India sent "colonists" to "plant colonies" in Southeast Asia, it was not an imperialistic political control with a supreme emperor ruling over the distant lands. "Cambodia formed part and parcel of that Indian cultural empire, which extended over Eastern and Southern Asia" (Bose, 1927, *ibid*). R. C. Majumdar, writing in the 1940s, attributed most aspects of Khmer culture to either India or Cambodia. Therefore, Cambodia (and Southeast Asia in general) became a site for intellectual colonization by India, and where issues of identity, cultural and political authority were being negotiated by Indians in response to British colonial presence.

military strength and economic prowess, and that in certain significant ways knowledge was what colonialism was all about. Adding to this, Mitter (1992, p. xiv) suggests that the colonial powers embarked on a mission to compile histories of their colonies to cope with the complexities of the conquered lands, and that "...the secret of political control lay in a sound knowledge of the subject people". In a similar vein, Bernard Cohn (1996) said that "The power to define the nature of the past and establish priorities in the creation of monumental records of a civilization, and to propound canons of taste, are among the most significant instrumentalities of rulership"<sup>28</sup>.

The unpacking of Cambodia's past was an extensive project which involved the collection of data and materials, designing classification systems and the building of museums and depositories to study the past. Cohn (p. xv 1996, pp. 80-81) points out that creating extensive documentation was a means to codify, package and subsume their newly acquired territories through the collection of information i.e. about natural resources, compiling historiographies, professing authority over religious texts and the display of archaeological and artistic objects. As we have seen in the earlier sections, the French set up an impressive institutional framework to systematically study and reconstruct Cambodia's past. Through their considerable research on the subject and extensive publication, they established themselves as the leading authorities on the histories of their colonies. Unfamiliar elements in Khmer art variously awed, fascinated, disgusted and flummoxed the Europeans as these features were completely foreign to their knowledge. Early visitors to India and Cambodia used familiar (or in their opinion comparable) images and analogies to compare these new elements to familiar ones such as Greek or Roman art as a means to evaluate and fit them

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<sup>28</sup>Cohn (1996, p. 10).

into their epistemological categories. The reaction to the feminine in art was an aspect of French colonial scholarship that was related to the gendering of their entire historiographical discourse which in turn was connected with defining their role as colonizers vis-a-vis the colonized.

### **3.4.1 European reaction to the feminine**

European reaction to the feminine in Indian and Khmer art varied from condemnations of vulgarity, voyeurism and consistently, a relegation of the feminine to the margins of scholarship. Nandy (1988) posited that other than politics, economics and cultural technologies, Western colonization was also founded on sexual and moralistic ideology. According to Nandy (1988, p. x), during the aftermath of the Second World War, it became obvious that apart from the political reasons, "...the drive for mastery among men (was)...of a world view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over the nonhuman and the subhuman, the masculine over the feminine...and the modern or progressive over the traditional or the savage". Nandy (1988, p. 4) suggested that the homology between sex and political domination was not an accidental by-product of colonialism but that colonialism "...was congruent with the existing Western sexual stereotypes and the philosophy of life they represented. It produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity". However, it would seem that that the basis for such a philosophy can be traced to much further back in time at least to the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.



In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 32) suggested that many of Hegel's ideas were "predicated on a sense of otherness" and that his views drew on comparisons with something or someone who existed on the outside, like the 'Oriental', the 'Negro' and so on. Unlike the Enlightenment and early Utilitarian thinkers who argued for a universal and static rationality, Hegel contended that human nature was made up of rational and irrational aspects and that this nature varied according to circumstances and place (Inden, 2000, p. 93). Inden (2000, *ibid*) explains that the German philosopher characterized the essence of Hinduism as idealist and a product of a mind dominated by imagination, which was predicated on the theory of a "divided human nature" and the difference between a "sensual imagination" and a "spiritual reason". According to Inden, Hegel portrayed Hinduism as a religion of extremes, created by an epistemology of imagination. The imagination or representation (*Vorstellung*, feminine), was the primary ability of the material stratum of the mind while reason (*Verstand*, masculine) was the spiritual. Further, the mode of knowledge for religion was representation (comprehending through images) or fantasy (comprehending without sensory experience) which was projected as an inferior form of reason which can only endeavor theoretical thought through the use of sensory images as in sculpture, painting or myth. Thus Hegel distinguishes the 'natural' religions like Hinduism from the 'later' religions like those of the Greeks, Jews and Christianity, the latter borne out of a philosophy characterized by the "reason of spirit" (*Geist*, masculine); while there might be a certain "orderliness" to the ascetic aspects of Hinduism, the other characteristics of the religions betrayed a sense of tumult. As Inden (2000, p. 95) explains "...the realm of nature...remains chaotic, wild and disorderly, held in thrall by the passions. Whence the multi-limbed, protean depictions of the divinity

'made bizarre, confused and ridiculous' in Hinduism, and the voluptuousness of image-worship on the part of those who remain in the world". Although these ideas about the Orient had existed in Europe for a while, it was during the Enlightenment that such views became "formalized" through philosophy, science and imperialism (Smith, 1999, p. 32).

According to Elizabeth Grosz (1994), the basis of Western philosophical traditions compartmentalized mind and body, reason and passion, psychology and biology and thought and extension and cast them as dichotomously opposed pairs. In traditional Western philosophy, the body has been portrayed as a source of interference to reason, and according to Plato, it is a prison for the soul, reason or mind (Grosz, 1994, p. 5). Grosz (p. 3 1994, p. 5) suggests that the binarization of the sexes and the world had been effected at the "threshold of Western reason" and that the mind/body opposition has been correlated with other oppositional pairs like reason/passion, sense/sensibility, self/other, depth/surface and so on. These terms implicitly function to define the body in "nonhistorical, naturalistic, organicist, passive, inert terms, seeing it as an intrusion on or interference with the operation of the mind which requires overcoming, a connection with animality and nature that needs transcendence" (Grosz, 1994, p. 3). In this correlation, women's bodies are presumed to be weaker, incapable of men's achievements, with female sexuality and reproduction prescribed to be her defining characteristics (Grosz, 1994, pp. 13–14). It can be argued that such associations, perhaps well-known in Western philosophy, might have influenced the way in which European authors depicted the masculine and feminine in Khmer art. Although Smith's reference was to the representation of the colonized as the Other by the West, it is also relevant to the depiction of the feminine in colonial texts in which female images were labeled as obscene or

incidental and were contrasted with the intellectual, abstract or virile masculine depictions.

Although several authors ascribed an irrationality and decadence to certain cultural expressions of their colonies, there was, at the same time, an opposing force to highlight the more masculine aspects of their colony's political history. Placed in opposition to the feminine were the images that depicted either overt masculinity (battles, kings/gods on their mounts, Ravana seizing Sita, the Churning of the Sea of Milk by the *asura* and *deva*) and so on. The focus of many colonial narratives was on various aspects of kingship with particular focus on certain significant figures such as Jayavarman II (the founder of the Angkor kingdom) and Jayavarman VII (the most prolific builder of architectural projects during the Angkor period), aspects that were projected as essentially masculine statements of Khmer history. With excavation projects of the magnificent monuments, building of roads to make them accessible to visitors and workers alike and displays in exhibitions and fairs, France created Angkor as a project worthy of the attention by salvaging its glorious past, as well as monetary and intellectual investment on the part of their imperial masters<sup>29</sup>. While such en-

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<sup>29</sup>Towards the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were missions to collect statues, bas-reliefs, pillars and other artefacts from the temple sites in order to embellish the museums back in France. As Louis Delaporte, one of the officers of a mission commented, these objects of Angkor would be collected to "enrich [France's] national museum with a completely new collection that would attract strong scholarly and artistic interest in a... great and vanished people". See (Edwards, 2007, p. 30). Among the numerous objects on display at the expositions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were two life-size replicas of the Giant's Causeway from Angkor Thom (depicting the *deva* and *asura* churning the *naga*) and the central sanctum of Angkor Wat which was only open to the king and the high priests during the Angkor period. The steep staircase leading to the inner chamber was shortened to about twenty steps to make it accessible to the visitors. See Edwards (2007, p. 34).

deavors did indeed marginalize the feminine, simultaneously, the projecting of “masculine” achievements of Angkorean Cambodia by the French was perhaps orchestrated to reflect the glory of its colonial possession and thereby of France herself.

One of the few exceptional circumstances where the importance of the feminine was acknowledged and appreciated was in the writings and drawings of the French artist Auguste Rodin. The royal dancers were brought to France in 1906 so that they would evoke the bas-reliefs of the Angkorean temples<sup>30</sup>. Rodin saw the royal dancers of King Sisowath perform as part of an exposition and was ecstatic about their dance movements and gestures. In the rhythm of the music and in the slow, fluid gestures, Rodin perceived an intimate connection with nature and a purity of spirit that he felt was absent in Greek dances which he also witnessed in the same exposition. Rodin also noted the lukewarm reception received by the Khmer dancers after their performance and commented that “Paris audiences are no longer capable of recognizing true beauty”<sup>31</sup>. Rodin’s descriptions and drawings were inspired by the sheer beauty of the dance and dancers. In academic scholarship, however, the feminine continued to be marginalized with the bulk of the discourse being devoted to the more masculine facets of Khmer history.

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<sup>30</sup>Edwards (2007, p. 39) quotes a review from *l’Illustration* where Cambodia (as defined by colonialists) was described as “a fallen country, which has preserved only two parts of its glorious past: its improbably grandiose ruins and its dancers, strange relics of a dead past”.

<sup>31</sup>Guse (1985, p. 271).

### 3.5 Conclusion

When it comes to the presence and significance of the feminine in Khmer religious art, the information in the primary sources and the colonial historiography based on those sources emerge as two discordant narratives. Many of the inscriptions (for example, those translated by Coedes) reveal that the divine feminine symbolized not only fecundity and prosperity but also political power and spiritual authority. Images on temples and other sacred sites are also strongly suggest these notions. The numerous goddess images both sculpted on the temple walls and the icons that were dedicated to the temple bestowed an undeniable sense of beauty and grace to the monument but there are indications that the significance of the feminine pressed beyond the aspect of ornamentation. Inscriptions inform us that sacred feminine power had the ability to bestow potency to the rightful ruler. The localization of Tantric traditions also indicate a critical presence of the feminine in Khmer art. At Prasat Kravan and Kbal Spean these localized ideas are expressed in a manner that requires a multi-sensory approach to understand and experience them.

CHAPTER 4

**EXPLORING THE STATUS OF THE FEMININE THROUGH POLITICS,  
PERFORMANCE AND TANTRA**

**4.1 Introduction**

As much as colonial scholarship has contributed significantly to our understanding of Khmer art and architecture, there still remain certain gaps in their historiography like for instance the status and role of the divine feminine and the role of Tantra in Khmer art. These topics which only recently have attracted some attention are subsets of a larger under-represented project, the history of women in Southeast Asia. In this chapter, we will examine two aspects of the feminine in ancient Cambodia, the cosmological and eco-political as well as the topic of a somewhat elusive nature, the existence and nature of Tantra in Cambodia and the status of the feminine in that tradition. This discussion will also highlight the scholarship of a few (post-colonial) authors on these topics. Ancient pre-Angkorean Khmer myths accord a powerful and independent status to the feminine, a status that shifted with time but was never really lost even during the Angkor period as evidenced by Khmer inscriptions. Although few, there were queens who ruled independently, examples that were dismissed as anomalies by certain authors. Women represented the earth and kings sought to access this power through strategic marriages. Dance performances that evoked the forces of nature, including those performed exclusively by women were vital to the fertility of the land and prosperity of the kingdom. Numerous images of dancers adorn temple walls and early modern and contemporary performance traditions evoke these ancient roots through their movements and cos-

tumes. These images of dancers, some of them depicting intense physical movement and energy, are testimony not only to the existence of Tantric traditions<sup>1</sup> in Cambodia but also to the importance of corporeality in understanding various aspects of Khmer culture. These animated images repetitively portrayed on temple walls animate the monument with its resounding energy. Through notions of fluidity in their roles and costumes, binary divisions and stereotypes of masculine and feminine are transgressed in the dance narratives and by the performers themselves. The ideas explored in this chapter prepares the context for the discussion on specific Khmer goddess images, to be taken up in the following chapters; the notion of entities without boundaries is vital to understanding the relation between built forms, images, humans and landscape and also in the re-stating of certain Indian Tantric ideas through Khmer idioms.

## **4.2 Current contributions on the status of the feminine in Cambodia**

The role of the divine feminine in Khmer art and religion is a largely unexplored topic. This negligence is linked to a larger under-represented aspect, namely, women's history in Southeast Asia. According to Andaya, the greatest obstacle to writing women's history is the absence of women's voices or accounts written by women themselves (Andaya, 2006, p. 52–55). Most of the evidence on women were transmitted through men and therefore the second-person accounts would only voice second-person experiences. While

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<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this study, the primary focus will be on Hindu Tantra; aspects of Buddhist Tantra will be discussed when they intersect with its Hindu counterpart.

these second-hand reports were being studied and compiled into historiographies (colonial projects in particular), the narrative of women or the feminine continued to remain in the shadows. In those historiographies, Western gender hierarchies which privileged the masculine over the feminine were at least partly to blame for relegating an inferior and peripheral status to the feminine in Southeast Asia. On the question of whether or not women have been “less inferior” than men in early modern Southeast Asia, Andaya (2006, p. 227) offers a “guarded defense” that while recognizing the enormous complexity and diversity in Southeast Asian cultures, kinship patterns, matriarchal customs and the contribution to agricultural production there is substance to the claim about the favorable position of women in the early period. Jacobsen (2008, p. 2) points to David Chandler’s observation that while the female voice is mostly absent in “accepted versions” of Khmer history, this is not necessarily a reflection of the passivity or unimportance of women. There have been a small but growing body of work on Khmer women and the feminine: *Changing Khmer Conceptions of Gender: Women, Stories and the Social Order* by Judy Ledgerwood (1990), a PhD thesis *Khmer Women on the Move: migration and urban experiences in Cambodia* by Annuska Derks (2008), and Mona Lilja’s *Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia: discourses of emancipation* (2008). In her PhD dissertation, Toni Samantha Phim focused on the role of dance in war-torn Cambodia and its importance in the re-creation of Khmer identity, culture and history (Phim, 1994). *Dance in Cambodia* (Phim and Thompson, 1999) grew out of Phim’s dissertation and was co-authored with Ashley Thompson. J.J. Boeles (1966) focused on the *yogini* images found in Cambodia and Thailand. Paul Cravath’s (2007) work on Khmer dance and drama traditions is a compilation of its history and function in Khmer culture. In the first part of the discussion, we will examine two as-



pects of power that have been associated with the feminine: the eco-political and cosmological. While Toni Samantha Phim's and Paul Cravath's works on dance and drama traditions examine the links between the feminine and the cosmological, Trudy Jacobsen's (2008) recent book focuses on the role of women in politics from ancient to modern times.

### 4.3 Political power and elite women in Cambodia

Jacobsen's work on women and power in Cambodia (Jacobsen, 2003, 2006, 2008) focuses on the 'preclassical'<sup>2</sup> and 'classical' period in Cambodia. In her recent book (Jacobsen, 2008) *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History* Jacobsen recognizes that conceptually, 'power' may be defined and perceived differently in different cultures. She also cautions against the assumption that non-Western states will all evolve along similar trajectories simply because they are non-Western. She observes that in a narrow sense, "Western meanings of power as solely relating to economic production and political decision-making are not appropriate to a discussion of women in Southeast Asia" (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 5). The danger of adopting such a Eurocentric approach is that one will tend to ascribe significance where it does not exist and deny where it does. When Western gender criteria and power arrangements are thus applied, "sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men), and people who do not (read: women)" (ibid). She observes that

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<sup>2</sup>Under her definition, the 'preclassical' period scans the period between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, while the 'classical' period dates from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. See Jacobsen (2008, p. 9).

Western scholars tend to be dismissive about the significance of women in areas other than the political or economic which indeed is the case in most historiographies on Cambodia. Jacobsen (2008, p. 4) argues that the concept of power in Southeast Asia has been and continues to be associated with supernatural and cosmological forces and thus is different from Western ideas of power which focuses on the ability to control economic production and military might. I argue that this differentiation between the political and cosmological is blurry, that it is not always easy to determine where one can draw the line separating the two. This will be argued more thoroughly in the following chapters where we examine the ways in which images, myth, inscriptions, performance and the natural world intersect with and inform the political and economic aspects of ancient Cambodia.

In her study, Jacobsen strives to step beyond the confines of Western conceptualization of power to expand its meaning with respect to the historical and cultural context of ancient Cambodia. Jacobsen (2008, p. 6) first centers her definition of power around the Khmer word *omnaich* which corresponds to ‘influence’, and is derived from the qualities of *baramai* (charisma), *bunn* (merit) and *mean* (wealth). She adopts the phrase ‘substantial influence’ to explain the concept of power in this context, as a network of social relationships between people and families that determine their actions and expectations towards each other. These relationships were called *khsae*, familial, political or institutional cords established between families and people through marriage or a “long-standing patron-client relationship” between a family and other individuals (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 7). She goes on to say that in this sense as well as in the traditional Western sense, women of the pre-Angkor period did have significance

and agency<sup>3</sup>.

### 4.3.1 Shifting status of the feminine in the Angkor period

Andaya (2006, p. 57) argues that origin myths are an important historical source, providing “indispensable insights into gender symbolism and the nature of sexual identity”. Cambodia has several myths in which the role of the feminine is a shifting one. The early creation myths recounted in the Chinese sources mention that the first ruler of Cambodia (or Funan as it was mentioned in the records) was an unmarried female who led her soldiers to war<sup>4</sup>. One such ancestor named Soma was believed to have established a race on earth which was named after her. Jacobsen rightly emphasizes that although myth is not proof of practice, the fact that the early inhabitants of Funan traced their ancestry back to a female ruler reveals that this, even as an idea, was acceptable. She says: “Had it not been in keeping with prevailing social attitudes toward women and power, the myth is likely to have been recast”<sup>5</sup>. But from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards the autonomous status of the female in the later myths seems to have changed<sup>6</sup> to one of dependency on other males associated with her<sup>7</sup>, for

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<sup>3</sup>But she also cautions that that this situation was most likely restricted to the elite, and that despite the possibility that an elite woman would have been considered more “powerful” than a non-elite man, one should preclude the notion that men were inferior to women in the early matriarchal society

<sup>4</sup>For the two early versions of the myth, see Jacobsen (2003).

<sup>5</sup>See Jacobsen (2008, p. 20).

<sup>6</sup>There are some exceptions to this suggestion: Soma and Kaundinya are invoked in the 11<sup>th</sup> century inscription of Komphus when tracing the ancestry of the king Jayavarman V (Coedès, 1937, p.174).

<sup>7</sup>Not all authors noted this change in status, for example, Cravath (2007, p. 197) proposes that the union of the numinous woman and the spiritually-endowed man is the common ele-

instance, in the case of Mera, the female protagonist of another creation myth. In this particular story, when the foreign male Kambhu arrives in Cambodia, he is invited to stay on by the naga-king who then gives his daughter Mera in marriage to Kambhu. The land that Kambhu ruled came to be known as *Kambu-ja* 'born of Kambu'<sup>8</sup>.

Partly based<sup>9</sup> on the change of status of the female in the later myth, Jacobsen suggests that there is a decline in the position and agency of women after the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Jacobsen attributes the change to the influence of Indian brahmins in the Khmer court, whose support was required by the kings to bolster their claims to legitimacy. In Indian brahmanical society, women were expected to be dependent on the male members of the family, and in Jacobsen's view, such tenets might have changed the way women were perceived in Khmer society. This idea is echoed by Cravath (2007, p. 45) who argued that one of the causes for the adoption of Indian religious forms was that the "increasingly centralized governments needed increasingly powerful masculine religious forms with which to identify the king, thereby lending universal authority to his central role in the ancient fecundity cult and as chief contact with the ancestral spirit world". The influence of patriarchal notions from India would, according to Jacobsen, account for the passivity of the female ancestor referred to in 10<sup>th</sup> century inscriptions<sup>10</sup>. She also quotes from an inscription of Suryavarman I that

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ment in all the different versions of the origin myth. But this assumption does not recognize the independent authority of both Liu Ye and Soma of the earlier myths.

<sup>8</sup>See Jacobsen (2003, p. 359–362).

<sup>9</sup>The other reasons Jacobsen (2008, pp. 42–45) states for the lowered status of the feminine is the lack of individually-represented goddess images, for example, that of Durga. This is not entirely true, for example, the images of Lakshmi at Prasat Kravan, Durga at Banteay Srei and other free-standing sculptures challenge Jacobsen's claim. .

<sup>10</sup>For a detailed discussion on the change in the status of the female ancestor in Khmer origin

portrays his military conquests with the “same enthusiasm as he approached his consorts”: “Toward the enemy army he was as towards a beautiful young woman, without blemish, who was given... for his amusement”; “in battle, the violent blows that the enemy dealt him with all their might affected him as if they were the bites and scratches of women” (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 45).

Jacobsen (2008, p. 19) points out that even by the Western metric of political authority, one would have to acknowledge that many Khmer women before and during the Angkor period exercised control and power<sup>11</sup>. Inscriptional references reveal that Cambodia was ruled by queens at various periods, for example, Kulaprabhavati who ruled in the 6<sup>th</sup> century C.E. was referred to as “the great queen, principle spouse of King Jayavarman” (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 22). She also issued inscriptions in her name during the time. Jayadevi, another queen, succeeded her father Jayavarman I in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. She ruled jointly with her husband Nripaditya and after his death, continued her reign alone. Scholars like Coedes and Briggs had supposed that the period following the death of Jayavarman I was one of chaos and misrule. This, as Jacobsen points out, implied that a female ruler was unacceptable to the locals who had revolted against her. An inscription dated to 803 C.E. from Sambor mentions several women, who by their royal title *kanhen kamratan en*, were most likely queens or princesses. Some queens of the Angkor period like Jyestha and Indrani were venerated by their male descendant rulers with statues erected in their honor (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 30). As the colonial historiographers and many after them focused primarily on the institution of kingship as male-centric, these female myths see Jacobsen (2003, pp. 359–362) and Jacobsen (2008, pp. 42–49).

<sup>11</sup>This assertion by Jacobsen does seem to contradict her earlier stance on the decreasing status of the feminine after the 9<sup>th</sup> century and one that does not seem to be entirely resolved in her work.

rulers and influential women were overlooked or treated fleetingly as anomalies. The Chinese traveler Chou Ta-Kuan also described seeing Khmer king with his female bodyguards. Apart from Chou Ta-Kuan's writings on the importance of women as temple officiants, the 1225 C. E. report by Zhoaragua is also revealing about the ritual significance of women in Khmer temples. Zhoaragua was the Chinese Superintendent of Maritime Trade in Canton and although his report is based on hearsay, Peter Sharrock suggests that it might be indicative of temple practices in Cambodia at the time:

[In Chen-la, i.e. Cambodia], the people are devout Buddhists. In the temple there are 300 foreign women; they dance and offer food to the Buddha. They are called a-nan [Skt. ananda (bliss)]...The incantations of the Buddhist and Taoist [Saiva yogin] priests have magical powers.

Sharrock 2009, p. 148.

In addition, women also received literary and religious education, and two queens even acted as religious instructors (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 62). Inscriptions also mention that several women owned property, donated land and slaves to temples. A 11<sup>th</sup> century inscription from the stele of Prasat Tnot Cum mentions that donations were made to a god and to a late princess and the request was put forth by an official (Cœdès, 1954, p. 221). The Sdok Kak Thom inscription also mentions that in the Saiva cult of the Devaraja, the right to worship the god was to be passed down from the sage Sivakaivalya to men or women in his maternal line (Sanderson, 2003-2004, p. 392). Sanderson says that the verse suggests that women had a right to serve as priests if only in the absence of a qualified male. This indicates that at the least, some elite and royal women did enjoy a

privileged status throughout the Angkor period and were also venerated in the after-life.

#### **4.4 Power and performance traditions**

Jacobsen also postulated that power in Southeast Asia has been linked to supernatural and cosmological forces<sup>12</sup>, and performance traditions offer one vista to understand these connections. Given the preference that historians have for written records, additional sources such as performances, textile traditions and oral histories are sometimes sidelined. Andaya (2006, p. 61) quotes David Hanlon a historian of Oceania when he remarked that the past can also be “sung, danced, chanted, spoken, carved, woven, painted, sculpted” and thereby as Andaya puts it “the documentary dominance of men can to some extent be countered by attentiveness to other receptacles for historical memories”. Andaya’s description of these sources as “other” implies their secondary status, setting them apart from the regular (documentary) sources. Andaya (2006, p. 60) also points out that the reluctance of the historian to accept performance as part of a “textual amalgam” could in part be explained by its ephemeral nature, that it cannot be locked down to a specific historic moment. As will be argued in the chapter on the Durga and Siva images, Andaya’s point about the amorphous nature of performance is problematic; inscriptions are often enigmatic themselves, necessitating an attentive approach to tease out the multiple meanings embedded in them. For that reason, texts can be understood as ephemeral as performance. Seen this way, it is unclear why performance as a source should be viewed only as an appendage and not mainstream.

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<sup>12</sup>See Jacobsen (2008, pp. 4–5).

In Phim and Thompson's book *Dance in Cambodia* the authors point out that dance has played a primordial role in Khmer culture. A reference in the 7<sup>th</sup> century Chinese account called 'History of Sui' which describes a royal funerary rite involving dances and drums suggests Cambodia's long history of performance. A Khmer inscription dated to 611 C.E. mentions dancers and musicians donated to a god in a temple as well as to a tree god (Phim and Thompson, 1999, p. 4). In *Earth in Flower*, Cravath (2007) corroborates a variety of sources, both documentary as well as visual dating from ancient times to elucidate what dance, and in particular, the dancer might have symbolized in the past. Nevertheless, little is known about the types of dance performances of the past. Despite the ubiquitous dancing figures in many Khmer temples, Phim and Thompson point out that it is unknown what exactly they danced. Cravath (2007, p. 25) states that dance in Southeast Asia appeared to have always been a magico-religious activity. Some of the key elements present symbolically in Khmer dances are references to stones, water, earth, all possessing ancient traditions perhaps dating back to pre-Hindu times, and which are expressed as either masculine or feminine (Cravath, 2007, pp. 17–18,38). These natural elements seem to have had special significance related to fertility and prosperity, and their interplay in gendered roles, Cravath suggests, in confrontation with each other as well as in seeking the spirits who could influence the outcome of their interactions has been the basis of Cambodian dance. With the adaptation of Hindu rites since the 5<sup>th</sup> century, these deities and dancers often took on a Sanskrit name in addition to their Khmer one. Local dance traditions probably amalgamated Hindu idioms as they came to be represented in art, architecture and in the performances themselves.

Cravath threads connections between myths and dance performances and



suggests that the interplay of the masculine and feminine forces forms the foundation of both dance and drama. According to him, dance was a means of communication between humans and the gods and ancestors to ensure a steady supply of water and rain which was essential in maintaining the vast Angkor kingdom. Phim and Thompson (1999, p. 4) point out that performance in and of itself was considered an offering to gods. According to Cravath (2007, p. 416), there is a belief that the most powerful dances will have the greatest effect in bringing life-giving rains. Therefore the performances by the king's dancers at the Royal Palace were believed to be particularly capable of communicating with the spiritual world to ensure the prosperity of the kingdom. The king's dancers were especially endowed with the power to attract the *neak ta* or territorial spirits into the medium. This observation is similar to Poree-Maspero's description of the agricultural rite where a woman who invoked spirits of the land to enter the rice fields<sup>13</sup>. This indicates a continuity of traditions and beliefs from ancient to at least the early modern period. The *neak ta* were given offerings during the performance of ceremonies like *Sampeah Kru*, which was held annually to obtain permission from the spirits to perform the dance<sup>14</sup>. The *tway kru* performed to acknowledge the *kru* or spirits, could be conducted in three ways: privately, as a troupe, or for the nation. The offerings were made exclusively by women and no men participated in the ceremony (Cravath, 2007, p. 426). This ceremony could be requested by the king to "create security" or for a specific need "as if the women were in contact with the causative spirits<sup>15</sup> even in their private ritual". The importance of dance and royal dancers as

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<sup>13</sup>See p. 68 in Chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup>The *lakhon khol* which refers to an all-male dance was also performed as an offering to the *neak ta* and was believed to have a direct influence in preventing drought. See Cravath (2007, p. 434).

<sup>15</sup>Sometimes the dancers themselves embodied the spirits in trance. There is evidence from

a means of harnessing spiritual potency underscores Jacobsen's comment that dancers were considered as messengers between royalty and gods, and their performance had the capacity to ensure the prosperity of the kingdom. Khmer inscriptions also reveal that the possession of economic and territorial might could have been channeled through the feminine in the Angkorean period, and that territorial power was sometimes defined *as* feminine.

#### **4.4.1 Peering under the grease paint: understanding the Khmer dancer**

Cravath (2007, p. 267) suggests that the persistent theme in Khmer dance drama is one for control of the Feminine, and this struggle exists at the realistic and archetypal level. He says "On the realistic level the struggle concerns the timeless, painful passing of the female from the father to husband. The hero-husband requires magic power and even help from animal energies to wrest his beloved from her father...". However, this analysis glosses over the autonomous power wielded by the Feminine in many of the dramas, evident even in Cravath's own descriptions. Take the story of Sovann Maccha. Here, Sovann Maccha the fish maiden and Hanuman engage in a battle of wits and tricks before coming together to cooperate in building a bridge across to Lanka. In Phim's telling of the Khmer tale<sup>16</sup>, she mentions that Sovann Maccha

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other Southeast Asian regions that priestesses or prophetesses could communicate with the spirits through trance. For example, in southern Vietnam, a priestess could communicate with the great mother goddess of the kingdom during times of floods or droughts. See Cravath (2007, p. 421).

<sup>16</sup><http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/Southeastasia/outreach/resource/CambodiaWebUnit/Folktales.html>

was knocked down by Hanuman after he pursues her for a good distance but she swims away, surprised and angry at his actions. Hanuman follows her and does cartwheels and somersaults but she is unimpressed. During the struggle, however, Hanuman realizes that he has fallen in love with her and instead of attacking her, tries to woo her. She too, returns his sentiments and helps him build the bridge for Rama to cross over to Lanka to find his beloved wife Sita. In this account, the focal point of Sovann Maccha and Hanuman's interaction is a coming together of two equal forces voluntarily and in an almost playful manner.

In the Monimekhala-Ream Eyso story, also a very popular Khmer legend, Cravath (2007, p. 211) points out that Monimekhala embodies the dominant Feminine force which cannot be subdued either by forceful or benign Masculine forces but he describes the theme as one in which the "endless Masculine struggle to control the Feminine" is played out where the "archetypal essence of male and female- the action and resistance create life". An observation of two recorded performances of the dance, one from the 1960's and the other from the 1980's revealed that though Monimekhala is startled by Ream Eyso's attempts (confrontational, aggressive and sneaky) to get at her magic ball, she is variously disdainful, angry and even threatening as she glides away gracefully from his clutches. Undaunted by Ream Eyso's threats with his magic axe, she even taunts him, dangling the ball tantalizingly close to his fingers. In the end, she throws up the ball, blinding him with its dazzling light and escapes. Ream Eyso sits on the floor dejected and tired. Realizing that his foe has escaped, he prances away in anger<sup>17</sup>. Phim and Thompson allude to the provenance of

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<sup>17</sup>To read Phim's account of the story see <http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/Southeastasia/outreach/resource/CambodiaWebUnit/Folktales.html>

thunder and lightening as well as the connection between dance and the ancestral/spirit world in this story: “Ream Eyso’s axe crashes through the air and Moni Mekhala’s sparkling ball lights up the heavens. Together they bring rain, inaugurating another agricultural season and cycle of life” (Phim and Thompson, 1999, p. 53).

Based on his evaluation of Khmer dance, Cravath (2007, pp. 214–215) proposes that the four main roles - male, female, *yakkha* (ogre) and monkey represent four aspects of a single individual. The harmonization of these various aspects helps an individual reach their ultimate potential (Figure 4.1). Cravath individuates the aspects as follows: forceful and jealous (male), passive and dependent (female), *yakkha* (a spiritually lower form of the feminine) and monkey (intuitive feminine aspect of the rational Masculine). These aspects, he says, informed the “psychic world view of the Cambodians for over a millennium”<sup>18</sup> As a counterpoint to Cravath’s gender characterization of the roles, Phim and Thompson (1999, p. 37) propose that there is a vacillation or blurring of binary divisions during performances. They say: “The noble men, in contrast to the giants, are gentle, even effeminate, while the noble females, with Seda (the Khmer name for Sita, wife of Rama) as the prime example, prove themselves at times braver than their masculine counterparts”. As mentioned earlier, Cravath’s own analysis, for example of the *Reamker* and the Monimekhala story appear to sup-

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<sup>18</sup>See Cravath (2007, p. 215). This notion is similar to what Connor (1982) terms in the Balinese context as The Unbounded Self. Connor describes the Balinese ‘person’ as a vessel or receptacle for a multiplicity of supernatural forces like the four siblings (*kanda mpat*), the reincarnating spirit of a deceased relative (*ane mahiyang*, *Sang Numadi*), the soul (*atma*) and an intermediary spirit (*taksu*), all of which constitute the individual and are responsible for the spiritual and physical mode of being of the individual. There are no distinctions drawn between the mind and body and the natural and supernatural worlds.

port Phim and Thompson's view: in the former, he mentions that at the end of the story, Sita chooses not to live with Rama but to return to the forest and eventually to the *naga* underworld. Similarly the female characters in the Preah Somut, Preah Sang, Preah Chey Sain and Preah Sovannahang stories also possess independent will and agency. In these stories, the female is depicted as endowing powers to the male, gaining life-giving powers themselves, possessing a certain freedom to enjoy physical pleasures without the "necessary" sanction and, in one instance, even giving up her husband to live with a prince who is smitten with her. Cravath (2007, p. 267) sums up that it was "...by the action of the Male upon the Female that fertility is achieved and must be achieved in the face of all opposition"; however, this wording implies the dominant action of the male over a supine, passive female, which does ignore the autonomy that some of the female characters of the stories display. Further, instead of perceiving the characters as individual and separate, the roles of the dancers as well as their costumes seem to suggest a certain permeability, blurring lines of identity and difference between them.

#### **4.4.2 Masculine/Feminine: not either-or but both-and<sup>19</sup>**

Rather than occupying distinct categories, several aspects in Khmer performance seem to suggest a fluidity of the masculine and feminine elements. According to Phim and Thompson, some roles do conform to stereotypes of male and female and yet women play the part of men in the nearly all-female classical

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<sup>19</sup>This refers to the notion of looking at the fluidity of bodies, social order and even the natural world and is referred to by Grosz in her discussion of the relevance of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy to feminism. See (Grosz, 1994).



Figure 4.1: Four main roles in Khmer dance drama: male, female, *yakkha* and monkey (Cravath, 2007).

dance and men play women in the all-male *lakhon khol*, stating that one is witness to the “simultaneous delineation and transgression of sexual boundaries; the ostensibly incompatible cultural phenomena of perpetuation and innovation are conjugated in a single performance”<sup>20</sup>.

Cravath suggests that the fluidity of identities is embodied in the Khmer female dancer herself. According to Cravath (2007, p. 85), gold and silver could have held special meaning in that they represented pure forms of the self, free from its baser elements. The two elements could symbolize the two “cosmic or divine realities”, and he points out that the Khmer dancer has embodied and even been identified with gold and silver, and as both Feminine and Masculine. Some of her costumes were made of silver and gold, and the *apsara* dancers are believed to contain both elements, sun and moon, as well as both genders. As the dancer traces her movements on the stage, the gold and silver, male and

<sup>20</sup>Phim and Thompson (1999, p. 13).

female are fused and dissolved into her single being; when she stops, the different elements come into focus again<sup>21</sup>. In performance practices, the female dancer, until recently, played both male and female parts, combining both elements like an androgynous being. Cravath likens her to mercury, which contains “both sun and moon” and only through the action of mercury could gold be extracted from metals. The idea of dissolution is key to certain Tantric ideas where forms of the masculine and feminine are fused together in the Tantric act. Further, in Tantra, the emphasis is not only on the symbolic but on the real and actual practice. For example, a *yantra* whether it is an image or the body, is not representational but is immanent that will lead the adept directly into the transformative experience. These Tantric practices combined with local beliefs surrounding the potency of the feminine also found artistic expression at sites like Prasat Kravan, Kbal Spean and Banteay Srei.

## 4.5 What is Tantra?

Before discussing the role of Tantra in Khmer art, it is necessary to first recognize the complex nature of Tantra itself. Hugh Urban (2003) observes that Tantra is perhaps one of the most ill-defined and hazy concepts in both academic and popular discourse. Being heterogenous in nature, Tantra has a myriad of meanings, from denoting a warp or loom (in the Vedas) to “chief potion or essence of a thing” to “any rule, theory or scientific work”, although the earliest texts (for instance the Mahabharatha) may not have contained materials which are now thought of as Tantric (Bharati, 1993, p. 199; Urban, 2003, p. 4). According to Agehananda Bharati, the difference between Tantric and non-Tantric tradi-

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<sup>21</sup>Cravath (2007, p. 86,203–204).

tions is methodological: “tantra is the psycho-experimental interpretation of non-tantric lore”<sup>22</sup>. Like other Hindus and Buddhists, the tantric also aims for liberation but his method of achieving it is purely experimental. *Yantra* are aids that help the practitioner to attain this goal of liberation. Dallapiccola (2002) describes a *yantra* as a diagram that functions as a visual aid for the adept. But Rawson (1973, p. 71) offers a wider definition of the term suggesting that even the human body could function as a *yantra*.

The difference between tantric and non-tantric traditions, Bharati (1993, p. 21) explains, also exists on the theological level. Tantra claims to offer a shortcut to liberation and flouts traditional, exoteric orthodoxy. Writings on Tantra also offer a variety of definitions of the tradition. Tantra has been associated with the erotic and sexual to such an extent that Urban (2003, pp. 1–2) points out, Tantra is often described as “sacred sex”<sup>23</sup>. Writing in the South Asian context, David Gordon White says Tantra was described to the Western world by Christian missionaries and colonial administrators to be little more than a “congeries of sexual perversions and abominations”<sup>24</sup>. This distorted interpretation has led to the idea that Tantra was a monolithic “cult of ecstasy” and that everything that has elements of eroticism is by definition Tantric. The association of eroticism with Tantra might have influenced views on the role of women in the tradition, a topic which itself has generated some debate.

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<sup>22</sup>Bharati (1993, p. 20).

<sup>23</sup>The risqué nature of Tantra has attracted a large body of provocative writing, with a variety of academic and popular definitions of Tantra. For example, Urban (2003, p. 4) quotes Jacob Needleman when he says: “The moment one hears the word “Tantrism”, various wild and lurid associations spring forth in the Western mind which add up to a pastiche of psychospiritual science fiction and sexual acrobatics that would put to shame the most imaginative of our contemporary pornographers”.

<sup>24</sup>White (2003, p. xii).



### 4.5.1 Women in Tantra

The role of the feminine in Tantric tradition is a controversial subject. Explaining the male-female dynamics in Tantric traditions, Bharati (1993, p. 200) says both Hindu and Buddhist Tantra “visualize their respective noumena as a supreme non-duality... which can be expressed only in terms of a diametrical polarity due to the common axiomatic notion that the supreme is inexpressible and non-communicable in itself, i.e. that it is totally transcendent (or totally immanent, which amounts to the same in Indo-Asian religious thought)”. To illustrate this point, Bharati (1993, *ibid*) says, the tantrics chose the paradigm of man and woman in their “cosmicized” version, god and goddess. Hindu tradition assigned the kinetic principle to the female and the static to the male (and vice versa in the Buddhist tradition). According to Bharati’s analysis, the male aspect (Siva) represented wisdom, was inert and passive compared to the female (Sakti) which represented power and was the active principle. What then was the role of women in Tantra practice? Urban points out that it is a subject of a lot of debate: is she a partner who achieves spiritual power from the union or is she merely a vessel who is used by the male to attain his spiritual goals? Scholarship on women in Tantra offer a variety of options, both negative and positive. Thomas Coburn (1984) claimed that writings on goddess worship as *sakti* has tended to slight that tradition, a view shared by Miranda Shaw (1994). According to Shaw (1994, p. 3,8), historians believe that Tantric Buddhism was an oppressive movement where women were marginalized and degraded, a view that can be traced back to colonial scholarship<sup>25</sup>. She also claims that it is

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<sup>25</sup>Male-female relations in non-Tantric contexts also seems to have disturbed certain colonial writers. Inden (2000, p. 110) comments that the presence of sexual relations in religion (as in the dualistic philosophy of Sankhya theory) was viewed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century writer Monier Monier-

only recently that there has been a growing interest in the role of women in the religious sphere and contribution to it. She says: "Perhaps the scholarly characterizations of the Tantric Buddhist yoginis as 'lewd', 'sluts', 'depraved and debauched' betray a vestige of Victorian indignation not only at non-marital sexual activity of women but also at the religious exaltation...of women"<sup>26</sup>. However, Urban counters this argument by observing that the available literature has more often celebrated and even exaggerated the role of women in Tantra traditions. Urban cites the work of Mircea Eliade and Heinrich Zimmer, who he points out have "celebrated the status of women in Tantra as a much needed affirmation of femininity, motherhood and the forces of nature" (Urban, 2003, p. 10). Undoubtedly there have been and continues to be a multiplicity of perspectives on the topic.

Reiterating Elizabeth Grosz's argument, Shaw (1994, p. 9) also suggests that the distorted view regarding women and religion in India is also because their role is defined along prevalent Western dualities such as nature and culture, matter and spirit and humanity and divinity which are not always relevant in Indian/Asian contexts; women were associated with the "devalued" halves of the dualities. But Sanjukta Gupta's explanation of the role of the feminine in Hindu Tantra<sup>27</sup> indicate that *sakti* was both consciousness and corporeal, a single entity possessing multiple characteristics, much like the Khmer dancer that Cravath described. White (2003, p. 132) points out that the fierce deities located at the periphery of the royal *mandala*<sup>28</sup> in Nepal are often female which only

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Williams as "a source of mischief rivalled only by that other passion, greed".

<sup>26</sup>Shaw (1994, pp. 8-9).

<sup>27</sup>See Gupta (1991).

<sup>28</sup>White (2003, p. 124) defines the *mandala* as the "mesocosmic template through which the Tantric practitioner transacts with and appropriates the myriad energies that course through every level of the cosmos".

suggests that the activated energy flowing through a *mandala* is nearly always feminine. As *yogini* she was also the semi-divine war goddesses of many medieval South Asian kingdoms (White, 2003, *ibid*). Shaw's work on women in Tantric Buddhism offers a model where the male-female dynamic is one of mutuality and complementarity. Her interpretation of Tantric texts suggests that women were looked upon as a source of spiritual power. She says: "The presence of women alongside men is not an afterthought or an option feature; it is integral to the Tantric paradigm, prized by the movement as its ideal pattern"<sup>29</sup>.

#### 4.5.2 What really is Tantra?

Given the pluralistic nature of Tantra how then do we identify something as Tantric? How many of the multiple characteristics would have to be present before identifying a concept or practice as Tantric? Urban suggests that the answer does not lie either with Indian traditions or with Western imaginings of what Tantra is. He recommends two approaches: one, that the answer to these questions arises out of "historical encounters" between the scholarly imagination and the object of study<sup>30</sup>. Our definitions of Tantra will be tethered to our own historical, social and ideological contexts and biases, and therefore one has to be self-critical of the narratives one writes and "ever attentive of the ways in which we ourselves are bound up in relations of power" (Urban, 2003, *ibid*). Two, that a fundamentally embodied<sup>31</sup> approach is what is needed to study

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<sup>29</sup>Shaw (1994, p. 195).

<sup>30</sup>(Urban, 2003, p. 272).

<sup>31</sup>Urban (2003, p. 273) emphatically states that by "embodied" he does not mean fetishizing the body as the essence and center of Tantra but rather the "...embodiedness of actual human agents and their struggles in the messy world of history, politics, economic and social change".

Tantra, arguing that "...we need to look at the peoples and traditions that we wish to identify as "Tantric" in their most material, corporeal forms, placing them firmly within their lived, social, political and economic contexts"(Urban, 2003, p. 273). Finally, Tantra cannot be seen as a "coherent, unified tradition, but as a fluid and shifting collection of particular texts, practices and traditions, woven and rewoven with a variety of other traditions...with a host of other non-Sanskritic and vernacular texts and traditions"(Urban, 2003, p. 43). With this in mind, we now turn to the practice of Tantra in Angkorean Cambodia.

#### **4.6 Tantra in Cambodia**

Urban's view that Tantra can be understood only in the light of "real human beings who perform "Tantric" practices" (Urban, 2003, p. 273) is most useful when studying the various living practices today but becomes problematic when it comes to examining Tantra in the past when there are no corroborating texts or other informative literature and only a few suggestive hints as in Cambodia. Just as using Indian artistic traditions to interpret Khmer ones is fraught with problems, there is a similar danger in using references from Indian texts and practices to elucidate Tantric practices in Cambodia. My approach, inspired by Wolters' concept of localization, is to examine which particular Indian Tantric ideas might have been adopted to highlight local Khmer cultural beliefs, which would have then found visual expression. No doubt, there are problems with this approach too as it is difficult to trace a clear genealogy of autochthonous traditions and of those resulting from inter and intra regional cross-currents such as those from other Southeast Asian regions. One should recognize the ubiquity of certain ideas and concepts, for example, the rever-

ence of natural elements; as Agehananda Bharati put it, striking similarities in formulation and diction can have indigenous origins and its appearance in other cultures may be an independent development and therefore when one encounters similar representations across different cultures, one must be wary of forcing them into a Procrustean bed. So to understand Tantra in Cambodia, I will attempt to corroborate various sources, visual, inscriptional and some references from Chinese accounts to get a glimpse of the Tantra practiced by real human beings. Moreover, it should also be emphasized that while it is essential to consult these material sources, Tantra is also a practice that is performed by the adept that may not be inscribed in textual form. As will be apparent in the discussion on images at Prasat Kravan and Kbal Spean, there is a need to press beyond texts and experience the transformation that Tantric imagery engenders through an embodied presence at the site. This is our approach to understand Tantric knowledge and practice in Angkorean Cambodia.

#### **4.6.1 Textual and visual clues to the presence of Tantra in Cambodia**

It is known that certain Indian Tantric texts did travel to Cambodia around the early 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Dehejia (1986, p. 74) mentions that a Khmer inscription notes four Tantric texts that were introduced to Cambodia, namely Sirascheda, Nayottara, Sammohana and Vinasikha and used in the royal initiation ceremony in 802 C.E. Urban (2003, p. 29) points out that it is difficult to prove the existence of Hindu Tantra for the period before 800 C.E. and this Khmer inscription is perhaps the earliest epigraphic evidence to mention Tantric lit-

erature. The 11<sup>th</sup> century Sdok Kak Thom inscription mentions that the priest Hiranyadama recited these Tantric texts from beginning to end during the *devaraja* ceremony initiating the rule of Jayavarman II as the king of Angkor in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Emma Bunker (2004) points out that proclaiming a king as *chakravartin* “places him metaphorically at the center of his kingdom, creating a verbal *mandala*, a concept that goes back to Vedic days in India”<sup>32</sup>. According to Adhir Chakravarti (1973, pp. 4–5), two other Tantra texts mention that Nayottara, Sammohana and Sirascheda sprang up from the left current while Teun Goudriaan (1985, p. 54) suggests that the Vinasikha also belonged to this particular current<sup>33</sup>. He also claims that the Sdok Kak Thom inscription men-

<sup>32</sup>Bunker and Latchford (2004, p. 387).

<sup>33</sup>Bharati (1993, p. 228) explains that Hindu Tantra makes a distinction between right and left-handed practices (although there are variations in the two categories themselves) with the former being performed on a purely mental plane while the latter involves women and the consumption of wine and meat. Bharati quotes from the Rudrayamala, which he says is one of the most reliable treatises on Hindu tantrism: “I shall proclaim left-handed practice, the supreme *sadhana* of Durga; following which the adept obtains *siddhi* speedily in this *Kali*-age. The rosary should be made of human teeth, the bowl (or plate) of a man’s skull; the seat of *siddha*-skin, the bracelet of woman’s hair. The sacrificial ingredients saturated with wine, meat etc., are to be eaten, o beloved. His solid food is young fish, etc., the *mudra* (here gesture) is the “Vina-sound” — *vina-rava* gesture...Ritualistic intercourse is held with a woman who is not one’s wife, and women of all castes are equally eligible. Thus is left-handed practice described which bestows all *siddhis*, o Benign Goddess” (Bharati, 1993, p. 230). The difference between the left and right-handed practices can also be highlighted through the manner in which the five M’s or *panchamakara* are used. The five M’s are *madya* (liquor), *matsya* or *mina* (fish), *mamsa* (meat), *mudra* (parched kidney bean, grain or any other cereal prepared in a way that is believed to be aphrodisiacal) and *maithuna* (sexual union) (Bharati, 1993, p. 244). Bharati explains: “If these five M’s are materially used, and the relevant instructions are being taken literally, then Hindus call this *vamacara* or ‘left-handed practice’; if they are taken in some metaphorical, indirect sense then they refer to it as *daksinacara* or ‘right-handed practice’.

tions three other Saiva Tantra texts, one of which, the Guhyasutra is a significant one<sup>34</sup> According to him, there was a wide range of Saiva texts known in Cambodia and that in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia was familiar with all the 64 Tantras<sup>35</sup>.

Of the four texts mentioned in the Khmer inscription, only one has been unearthed so far, the Vinasikha Tantra, which has since been translated by Teun Goudriaan (1985). Some sections from the text may reveal why it was chosen by the Khmer/be of relevance in the Khmer context. Goudriaan suggests that the Vinasikha appears to be the most important source for the royal installation ritual and that the chief deity of this text is a form of Siva known as Tumburu<sup>36</sup>. The Sdok Kak Thom inscription mentions that the Brahmin priest Hiranyadama taught a unique *siddhi*<sup>37</sup> and the method to realize it to Sivakaivalya who was the founder of a lineage of royal priests (Goudriaan, 1985, pp. 24–25). The inscription also notes that Hiranyadama showed Sivakaivalya the “four faces of Tumburu” which Goudriaan suggests could refer to the four Tantric texts. Since the Vinasikha itself does not refer to its primacy over other texts, the fact that it has been accorded the central place in the Khmer ritual prompts Goudriaan to suggest that the installation itself may have been performed by

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<sup>34</sup>The 12<sup>th</sup> century inscription of Prasat Tor mentions the Guhyatika which Cœdès (1942, p. 240) points out is a commentary on a Tantric text.

<sup>35</sup>White (2003, p. 11) explains that the source of all power and being in the world, the god-head, “externalized himself...in the form of a series of female hypostases, a cluster of (often eight) great Goddesses, who in turn proliferated into the multiple circles of feminine energies (often sixty-four) that were their Yogini entourage”. Presumably, Chakravarti was referring to a collection of texts or system of knowledge associated with this particular thought.

<sup>36</sup>The worship of Tumburu is not unique to India or Cambodia. Goudriaan (1985, pp. 27–30) calls to our attention the many references to Tumburu in Sanskrit hymns and fragments from Bali.

<sup>37</sup>One definition of *siddhi* is that it is a “collective designation for the magical powers mastered through yogic practices and meditation” by the practitioners. See Dallapiccola (2002).

someone well-versed in the ritual, presumably to use his discretion in choosing this text over the others. Additionally, Alexis Sanderson (2003-2004, p. 360–361) also points out that there is ample evidence to strongly suggest that ceremonial rituals may have been innovated and supplemented with instructions from ancillary sources, suggesting a syncretism of traditions. Therefore the Vinasikha text would also have been modified to fit the needs of the client in this case, a king who proclaimed himself as the *chakravartin* or ruler of the world.

Visual representations also gesture towards the practice of Tantra in Angkor-rean Cambodia. Inscriptions like the 10<sup>th</sup> century Banteay Srei inscription mentions the dedication of an image of Vagiswari, which is a Tantric form of Saraswati by the founder of the temple (Finot et al., 2000, pp. 82, 125). This deity is also mentioned in two other inscriptions (Finot et al., 2000, p. 125). A deposit box found in the 10<sup>th</sup> century temple Bat Chum has been suggested to be a magic diagram drawn in conformity with a Tantric text named Sricakrasambharatantra (O'Connor, 1966, p. 59). An ascetic figure, identified as an Acarya in one of the Angkor Wat reliefs carries a *vajra*, a ritual implement that has been associated with Tantra <http://www.webcitation.org/5ugzWx9xw>. Emma Bunker points out two other *mandala* in sculptural form which she suggests is Tantric Hindu in nature. Bunker and Latchford (2004) believes that these two *mandala* were important implements in Tantric practice which also serve as guides for the practitioner to lead him to the ultimate truth. She goes on to say that these implements were supposed to have been secret icons for individuals to worship and therefore not mentioned in Khmer inscriptions. The first dated to the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century, features a standing image of the sun-god Surya holding two lotus buds and surrounded by a circle of eight deities which include Rahu from the Nine Planets group. According to Bunker, the planetary



deities are also directional gods *dikpala* in this Khmer version. The other sculpture which dates to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, (Figure 4.2) displays a seated Chandra, the moon-god also holding two lotus buds and surrounded by eight seated figures. Bunker also compared the iconographical similarities between the multi-armed dancing Siva and the Hevajra images (Figures 4.3 and 4.4). The “exaggerated” dancing pose of the Siva image is almost identical with the pose of the Hevajra, a Buddhist Tantric deity, which became popular in Cambodia after the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Vinasikha also describes Tumburu as having multiple arms and heads.

The significant role of the Tantric texts in the coronation ceremony, the possible incorporation of select Tantric elements into religious art and the references in the inscriptions suggest that Tantrism may have existed as a part of whatever form of Hinduism and Buddhism was followed in Cambodia, and perhaps not as a separate religious stream. What could have been the role of women or the feminine element in such a tradition?

#### **4.6.2 Clues to the role of the feminine in Khmer Tantra**

In the Vinasikha (which Goudriaan (1985, pp. 58–59) calls a “clearly male-oriented” text), the male deity Tumburu, is the “central figure, identical with Ultimate Reality, beneficial, controlling ruthless activity of the females who may protect the devotee...but who inspire terror in the enemy. No mention is made of a personal Sakti of Tumburu or of male partners (Bhairavas) of the four goddesses. The Sakti influence is therefore limited and of a very special kind” (Goudriaan, 1985, pp. 59–60). While this may be true, the union of the male



Figure 4.2: Chandra Mandala, 12<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia <http://www.webcitation.org/5ugzWx9xw>.



Figure 4.3: Dancing Siva, 13<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia <http://www.webcitation.org/5ugzWx9xw>.



Figure 4.4: Hevajra, 12<sup>th</sup> –13<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia <http://www.webcitation.org/5uhs6gzDH>.

and female *bija* or the seed-*mantra*/alphabets of the five directions (the male in the center with the four directional females) is also emphasized. For example, verse 67ab says: “Concentration on the Five Bijas results in the realization of all one’s desires” (Goudriaan, 1985, p. 105). The worship of the male god is to be conducted while showing a *mudra* or hand gesture known as the *yonimudra* which symbolizes the womb<sup>38</sup>. The four goddesses located at the four directions of the compass incorporate the ferocious aspects of the god’s sovereignty. Khmer inscriptions contain references to goddesses/women positioned at the cardinal points of the kingdom, for example in verse LIX in the Pre Rup inscription (Coedès, 1937, p. 113). Cravath (2007, p. 95) also points out that the five wives of the Khmer king might have represented his principal wife who corresponded to the center of the kingdom and the other four, to the four cardinal directions; this might have been a manifestation of the king’s “continued ritual fecundation of the earth”. Current dance traditions also include offerings made by dancers to the four directions (Cravath, 2007, p. 344). A relief on the riverbed at Kbal Spean also seems to figuratively and broadly reflect this arrangement (Figure 4.5). But in this representation, all the directional and central elements are depicted as male (*linga*) which are framed protectively by the female principle (*yoni*). The quincunx arrangement on the summit of several Khmer temples represents the Vinasikha description more closely. For instance, four of the corner sanctuaries on the top tier of Pre Rup have female niche figures while the central sanctuary has male figures, although the layout is slightly different from that described in the text (Figure 4.6). The images on Pre Rup are in a state of ruin so it is not possible to detect whether or not the niche figures were de-

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<sup>38</sup>For a description of this gesture see Goudriaan (1985, pp. 108–110).



picted in a ferocious aspect<sup>39</sup>. There have been Buddhist Tantric images that do not have fierce expressions, for example, the Vajrapani image from the period of Rajendravarman (10<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) although it holds the *vajra* and *ghanta* at its waist (Sharrock, 2009). So it is not imperative that all Tantric images contain the same set of iconographic rules. One of the female figures at Pre Rup also has three faces (Figure 4.7) (this deity could, like Brahma, be depicted showing three out of its four faces), another interesting feature, given that the Vinasikha mentions that the four goddesses surrounding Tumburu have four faces. Another female niche figure also has a bird or animal face (Figure 4.8) which recall other Tantric goddesses in India who are similarly portrayed in art.



Figure 4.5: *Linga* and *Yoni* arrangement at Kbal Spean, 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

According to Dehejia (1986, p. 74), the Sirascheda was also known as Jayadratha Yamala which contains references to *yogini*. The few Khmer style

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<sup>39</sup>Judging by the niche figures on other Khmer temples, it would be safe to assume that they had gentle expressions.

	Aparājītā black	
Jayantī yellow	Tumburu	Jayā white
	Vijayā red	

Figure 4.6: Directional deities envisioned in the Vinasikhatantra (Goudriaan, 1985).



Figure 4.7: Three-faced female deity at Pre Rup, 961 C.E., Cambodia.





Figure 4.8: Bird/animal faced deity at Pre Rup, 961 C.E., Cambodia.



*yogini* images that were discovered in Thailand add substance to the suggestion that Tantric practices might have existed in Cambodia. J. J. Boeles (1966), who analyzed these *yogini* images in one of the few early studies on the divine feminine, linked them to the Tantric Hevajra cult<sup>40</sup>. Boeles points out that unlike the Tibetan images of Hevajra where he is generally represented embracing his *prajna* or *sakti* Nairatmya, the Khmer Hevajra is mostly depicted dancing alone<sup>41</sup>. The author noted one exception at a museum in Udol, Thailand where a standing male tantric deity (Hevajra?) is depicted in a deep embrace with Nairatmya. Two of the female images correspond to two *yogini* named Cauri and Candali<sup>42</sup>. According to the Hevajra-Tantra, these were among the eight directional goddesses who surrounded the male god Hevajra (Boeles, 1966, p. 21). Unlike the usual Khmer goddesses, one of the images depict the *yogini* with a fearful expression, her leg uplifted as in a dance and holding what appears to be a boar. The posture of Boeles' *yogini* are very similar to those of other female deities depicted on the walls of certain Khmer temple. Peter Sharrock in a recent article (2009, pp. 146-147), suggested that the dancers featured in the temples of Preah Khan and Banteay Chmar could be *yogini*, with their foot raised to their inner thigh in an extreme movement of dance (Figure 4.9; Sharrock, 2009). According to Sharrock, these dancers were central to the cult of Hevajra, a deity who

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<sup>40</sup>Boeles suggests that although the rites connected to the cult of the Hevajra might have been secret, the sect itself was not an obscure one; even Kublai Khan, the Chinese emperor was consecrated as Hevajra (Boeles, 1966, p. 26).

<sup>41</sup>There are obvious similarities between the iconography of Hevajra and Siva Nataraja. Researching the iconological connections between the two images would make for an interesting study.

<sup>42</sup>There are other examples from the 12<sup>th</sup> century Khmer temple Phimai that feature dancing images of *yogini* and *yogini*-like figures. This suggests that Tantric worship involving goddesses may not have been uncommon in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

worked through the intercession of the eight ascetic goddesses.



Figure 4.9: Flexed dancers at the Preah Khan temple, 1191 C.E., Cambodia.

Boeles (1966, p. 22) explains the singular posture of the Cauri and Candali images thus: the “uplifted right hand, and with raised right foot touching the inner side of the left leg below the knee, are characteristic of the majestic but frenzied heavenly dance performed on a prostrate body in *rigor mortis*”. The two images capture the intensity of the moment through this posture. He further explains that according to the text, these goddesses slay their “seats” who are Hindu male gods that represent ignorance<sup>43</sup>. After the slaying, the goddesses then perform a ritual dance on their corpses. The ornaments worn by the deities, both the Hevajra and *yogini*, carry a symbolic meaning too. Boeles quotes from David Snellgrove’s translation of the Hevajra-tantra regarding the significance of these ornaments: “The crown is worn for the adoration of one’s *guru* and master and chosen divinity. Ear-rings are worn to indicate one’s deaf-

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<sup>43</sup>Boeles (1966, p. 21).

ness to evil words spoken against one's *guru* and '*vajra*-holder'. The necklace suggests the *mantras* intoned, the bracelets one's renunciation of harming living beings, the girdle one's service of the *Mudra*. The body should always be signed with those signs of the Five Buddhas" (Boeles, 1966, p. 22). What also emerges from Snellgrove's description of the symbolism is also the "sounding" of the image/body through its various ornaments. In such a depiction, the image transcends beyond its inanimate nature to portray a body in frenzied motion, with the ornaments functioning as extensions of the body itself, resounding with the intensity of the animate body. As she dances with flexed arms and arched back, she tramples the supine body of the male god beneath her feet. Therefore, apart from the symbolic significance of this goddess, the physicality of her being and her actions are also thrown into sharp focus. The body of the dancer is really the locus of the energy and action, an aspect that is somewhat subsumed in Snellgrove's description. As Philip Rawson (quoted in Bunker and Latchford (2004, p. 386)) in his book *Tantra: the Indian Cult of Ecstasy* wrote "One must rouse all the energies one can discover in his body, emotions and mind, and combine them into a vehicle which will carry him towards enlightenment". Several temples, for example Angkor Wat, Preah Khan and the Bayon among others, have images of female dancers sculpted in groups and bands on their walls. If we were to consider the physicality of the body and its tense energy then one can visualize the entire monument pulsating with the dynamic movement of the dancers. The walls of the temple lend themselves as an ideal canvas for the repetition of the images while the images animate the monument with its energy. The role of corporeality is a vital component to how one understands Khmer religious culture itself, which will be elaborated in the following chapters on the goddess images at Prasat Kravan, Kbal Spean and Banteay Srei.

## 4.7 Conclusion

Written sources, both indigenous and foreign, indicate that women in Cambodia held positions of authority at various periods of time, although it might have been a shifting status in some respects. The knowledge and practice of some forms of Tantrism, the importance of corporeality in addition to the fluidity of binarisms in identity set the stage for the discussion on the goddess images from Prasat Kravan, Kbal Spean and Banteay Srei. The evidence for Tantra with reference to the first two sites may at first seem disparate and even fleeting at first sight but to gain clarity it is incumbent not to seek equivalents of Indian Tantrism in the Khmer contexts. The images at Prasat Kravan and Kbal Spean suggest a re-phrasing of Indian Tantric notions in local idiom. The image of Durga juxtaposed with that of Siva at Banteay Srei in many ways illustrate the vacillation of gender much like in some of the Khmer performances. All three sets of images creatively combine architecture and landscape into its conceptualization.

## CHAPTER 5

### MAHA/SRI/LAKSHMI AT PRASAT KRAVAN AND LAKSHMI AT KBAL SPEAN

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the significance of select goddess images from specific sites namely the (Maha)Lakshmi of Prasat Kravan and the Vishnu and Lakshmi images at Kbal Spean. Along with inscriptional evidence, these images will be analyzed in the context of localized Tantric notions and the use of natural elements to articulate those notions. A recent study by Jacobsen (2008, pp. 43–45) suggests that after the 9<sup>th</sup> century goddesses were accorded a more passive identity, dependent on her male partner, inferior to him and rarely (if ever) represented independently in art. Similarly, Roveda (2005, p. 36) claims that Khmer society was a “... masculinized cultural and political domain that cultivated the ideology of power and hierarchical male bonding typical of absolutist states. The virile male body had such a dominant position in elite visual culture where women were marginalized in the semi-nude images of *apsaras* and *devatas*, representing idealized feminine forms. Women were simply mothers, sisters and wives whose bodies were de-eroticized, made passive and powerless”. The palpable vitality and power of the (Maha)Lakshmi and other deities like the Durga at Banteay Srei are obvious challenges to these views. It is not entirely surprising, however, to encounter views like those of Jacobsen and Roveda. Overt aggressiveness or sexuality is not something one usually associates with Khmer goddesses. But there is reason to suggest that a gentility of artistic expression camouflaged her vitality and authority in politics and religion. In many

Khmer inscriptions the feminine is shown to be several things: dutiful, beautiful, gentle, coy, sensual, potent and powerful. It is perhaps difficult to associate Lakshmi with anything other than docility and deference, and certainly not with Tantra. However, Lakshmi's identity as the earth coalesced with the autochthonous female spirit on whom depended the longevity and prosperity of king and kingdom. The geographic location of Kbal Spean afforded a canvas to express this significant association between goddess and king using localized Tantric idioms. The feminine has been labeled as passive and peripheral also because the lens through which they have been viewed are tinted with Western gender dichotomies which correlate the mind/body opposition with male and female, where the male and mind and woman and body become "representationally aligned" (Grosz, 1994, pp. 3–4). In these equations, the mind/male part is afforded a privileged ranking over body/woman. The relationship between image, monument and landscape at the three sites provide a way to transcend these dichotomies by emphasizing the permeability of boundaries between subject/object and mind/body: at Prasat Kravan, the goddess who bestows power on her male consort draws energy from the earth (whom she also personifies) which then permeates through the monument. Lakshmi who also plays the role of the *naga* princess exchanges powerful sexual fluids with the Vishnu/king at Kbal Spean thus ensuring the longevity of the king and kingdom. Lakshmi and Vishnu, carved onto the bedrock infuse the river and land with what White (2003, pp. 10–11) termed as "power substances". These images therefore urge us to reconsider our understanding of gender identities, and especially the labels of "passivity", "peripheral" all too easily bestowed upon the feminine in Khmer art. While it important to acknowledge the valuable contribution of older as well as more recent scholarship towards the study of Khmer art, it is also neces-

sary to state that it provides only limited ways of understanding the relevance of the feminine in Khmer culture. My research incorporates older scholarship on the subject but also attempts to elucidate those moments where binaries can be suspended, binaries that have encumbered the way we understand gender and sexuality in the Khmer context. My reading of the sources attempts to see beyond these dichotomies set up by Structuralist scholarship.

## 5.2 Prasat Kravan

Located on a northeasterly direction from the town of Siem Reap, surrounded by a moat stands the temple of Prasat Kravan (Figure 5.1) (which is a modern name and translates to Cardamom Temple). This temple was built in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. during the reign of Harshavarman I, a king who was not especially distinguished in the line of Khmer kings (Chandler, 2000, p. 40)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the inscriptions found at this temple are in such a state of ruin that there is little information we can glean from them. From the inscriptions on the central sanctuary, we know that the temple was probably consecrated in 921 C.E., and that a certain Harshalakshmi (who might have been a royal/elite woman) made a donation to this temple and that an image of Trailokyanatha (which translates to 'Lord of the three worlds') was erected here by someone

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<sup>1</sup>The interesting aspect of his reign was that a rival seat of authority was established at Koh Ker, about 60 miles north of Angkor, by Harshavarman's uncle Jayavarman IV. This usurper proclaimed himself as king and proceeded to build several monuments, including the towering Prasat Thom, second in height only to Angkor Wat (and therefore the tallest at the time it was built). It is possible that his influence extended to northeastern Thailand where a number of temples in the Koh Ker style have been found. By contrast, Prasat Kravan was perhaps the only remarkable monument to be built in Angkor during that time.

named Mahidharavarman who also donated slaves to this temple (Cœdès, 1952, p. 68,72–73). The inscription also contains an extensive list of slaves to the temples along with details of their duties. On the tower south of the central sanctuary the inscriptions mention the erection of another statue called Tribhuvanaswamin (which is another version of Trailokyanatha) by another official Sri Virendradhipativarman who also donated slaves to this sanctuary (Cœdès, 1952, p. 74). The north tower which contains the images of the goddesses also has an inscription mentioning three lists of slaves donated to the goddess Sri or *Vrah Sri* by Mahidharavarman in 921 C.E.



Figure 5.1: Prasat Kravan, 921 C.E., Cambodia.

The monument was extensively restored from the mid to late 1960's by Bernard Groslier of the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient and new bricks used in this process are marked 'CA' which stands for Conservation d'Angkor. Constructed mostly out of brick, Prasat Kravan consists of five sanctuaries or towers which stand on a common terrace. All the towers have three false doors with



the main doors opening out to the east. Remnants of other structures are scattered around the compound. Of the five sanctuaries, only two of them still have partially standing *vimana* or tiered towers on top, the one in the middle being the largest. The outer walls of the sanctuaries might have been decorated with sculptures although only the central and northern sanctuaries seem to have remnants of small deities, floral decorations as well as standing male figures carved into the niches on either side of the central doorway<sup>2</sup>. Each of the sanctuaries is entered by a doorway made of intricately carved sandstone pillars and lintels. Some of the lintels seemed to be either unfinished or damaged. What makes Prasat Kravan distinctive among the Angkorean monuments are the exquisite brick reliefs sculpted on the inner walls of two sanctuaries.

### 5.2.1 Vishnu and Lakshmi of Prasat Kravan

Entering the central sanctuary the immense multiple-armed relief of Vishnu sculpted on the west wall (Figure 5.2) immediately makes its presence felt. Vishnu stands with his eight arms spread out like wings on either side, and is surrounded by six rows of standing worshippers, both male and female. On top of the central image is a figure of a lizard and below that, six standing figures with their hands folded. He is flanked by two other representations, Vamana<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>2</sup>An interesting feature of some Khmer temples is that the adjacent niche (guardian) figures on a single face of the temple are of two different types: at Prasat Kravan the figure on the right has a benign expression (like the *deva* images in the Churning of the sea of Milk relief) and the one on the left with a ferocious expression corresponds to the *asura* images. By contrast, the guardian deities on the Chola temples are always menacing figures.

<sup>3</sup>Due to the extraordinary spiritual prowess of the king Bali, the gods were deprived of their offerings and sacrifices. When they complained to Vishnu, he took on the incarnation or *avatar*

on the south (Figure 5.3) and Vishnu seated on Garuda on the north (Figure 5.4) wall. The four-armed Vamana, is depicted as he takes his two steps to claim the universe. With his knees bent, Vamana places one foot on a pedestal and one on a lotus, as though he is claiming the earth and then stepping across the oceans. This latter is further implied by the three undulating lines between his two steps presumably representing the oceans. At his feet kneel two figures, one with hands folded and the other holding the lotus on which Vamana has placed his foot. The entire scene is framed within an elaborate arch much like a temple doorway, with decorated pillars on either side. Facing this image on the northern wall is the final representation of Vishnu, seated on his mount Garuda. In this dynamic depiction, the god is four-armed, seated on Garuda who has his wings spread wide as though in flight. With his two hands he holds Vishnu's legs. As in the previous representation of Vamana, there are two seated male devotees at the bottom of the scene. Maurice Glaize (1993) in his book *A Guide to the Angkor Monuments*, mentions that this square sanctuary contained a *linga* on a pedestal, presumably found when the French first inspected the temple<sup>4</sup>.

As in the central tower, the northern one also contains brick reliefs of three goddesses. Unfortunately these sculptures are damaged to such an extent that it is not possible to positively identify these graceful images but in light of the

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of Vamana the brahman and went to set things right in the world. Vamana attended a sacrifice conducted by Bali and asked him for three paces of land to build his hut. Against the advice of his spiritual guide, Bali agreed. Immediately, Vamana grew tremendously in stature and with his two steps covered the entire universe. Seeing this, Bali realized who Vamana really was and bowing before him, offered his own head as the third pace. Vamana placed his foot on Bali and pressed him down to the nether world where he reigned as king in recognition of his great deeds. See Dallapiccola (2002).

<sup>4</sup>See <http://www.webcitation.org/5uhBcFLQA>.



Figure 5.2: Standing eight-armed Vishnu on the west wall, Prasat Kravan.

Vishnu sculptures in the central sanctuary, it is likely that these goddesses were different forms of his consort Lakshmi. It is possible that the goddess mentioned in the Prasat Kravan inscription to whom donations were made was a movable image of Sri/Lakshmi placed in northern sanctuary. The half-visible image of a seated Gajalakshmi<sup>5</sup> on the lintel acts as an identifying marker for this goddess sanctuary (Figure 5.5).

An imposing image of a two-armed goddess occupying the western wall fills the senses as one approaches the doorway. With her delicately fluted skirt coming down to her ankles, she stands bare-breasted with her shoulders straight and directly engaging with the viewer. Her two hands seem more to be gesturing a *mudra* than engaged in the act of holding objects although this is only a surmise given the ruinous state of the image (Figure 5.6), (Figure 5.7). At her

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<sup>5</sup>In this depiction, Lakshmi is usually seated on a lotus and is flanked on either side by elephants who anoint her with water.



Figure 5.3: Vishnu as Vamana, Prasat Kravan.





Figure 5.4: Vishnu seated on his mount Garuda, Prasat Kravan.



Figure 5.5: Gajalakshmi on lintel on the North tower, Prasat Kravan.

feet kneel four worshipers, two on either side. Despite the unfortunate state of these reliefs, the quiet authority of this image is apparent. To her left is a badly damaged relief; all that remain today are the goddess's two feet and the remains of two kneeling figures (Figure 5.8). The more intact of the three images is carved on the southern wall and has some points of interest (Figure 5.9). The iconographic features of this deity render the reading of this image more complex than it first seems. This goddess has four arms; one of the damaged left arms hold what could be an axe and her two right arms hold a wheel and a trident, which is an unusual combination for an image that had been identified as Lakshmi.



Figure 5.6: Top half of a goddess identified as Lakshmi on the West wall, Prasat Kravan.





Figure 5.7: Lower half of a goddess identified as Lakshmi on the West wall, Prasat Kravan.



Figure 5.8: Damaged image of an unidentified goddess on the North wall, Prasat Kravan.



Figure 5.9: Maha/Sri/Lakshmi on the South wall, Prasat Kravan.



### 5.3 Tantric connotations of the goddess shrine

The goddess holds attributes that are traditionally associated with Vishnu (the discus) as well as Siva (the trident), a combination usually held by *sakti* images. Dallapiccola (2002) defines *sakti* as the personification of the female dynamic power, or the energy of any deity. *Sakti* literally translates to “power” or “potency”. Sanjukta Gupta (1991, p. 205) points out that *sakti* “denotes God’s power, his indomitable energy and at the same time his conscious thought”<sup>6</sup>.

The idea of *sakti* was not as popular in Vaishnavism as it was in Saivism; nevertheless *sakti* worship was intimately connected to Tantra. Therefore, based on the iconographic details this four-armed goddess could be Mahalakshmi where she assumes the form of *sakti*, a Tantric deity holding several attributes including the trident and discus<sup>7</sup>. Based on this information, it is reasonable to refer to this goddess as Maha/Sri/Lakshmi for two reasons: one, this assumption of

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<sup>6</sup>The concept of an energy source that was not inherent to the gods but derived from elsewhere was only briefly mentioned in the Vedic literature. Dallapiccola suggests that the reason why the Brahmanas and Upanishads don’t mention it is that these texts were more concerned with esoteric discussions. The cult of local and nature-goddesses were probably gaining popularity and were later assimilated into the Saiva mythology. She goes on to say that these local goddesses then provided the background for Saivite goddesses such as Durga, Kali etc. which are all manifestations of the supreme goddess Mahadevi. Arguing against the view that goddess cults were part of a folk tradition in India, White (2003, pp. 40–41) says that worship of goddesses such as those associated with childbirth, prosperity (Lakshmi) and sovereignty (Sri) had spread well beyond India’s borders into East, Central and Southeast Asia.

<sup>7</sup>One could ask that if this was indeed a *sakti* image why was this prominent and powerful image not located on the central wall (corresponding to the eight-armed Vishnu’s position in the central sanctuary) instead of the two-armed goddess that presently occupies it. If the identities of all the goddesses were known, it might have provided a clue to this question but without them, it is difficult to provide a satisfactory response at this point.

her being Mahalakshmi is based only on a partial identification of attributes, and two, the inscription mentions the goddess as Vrah Sri which may refer to this particular deity.

Gupta (1991, p. 206) explains that the Tantra tradition (in India) “separated and concretized God’s creative thought and action as his *sakti*”. By this definition, *sakti* fuses both thought and action by being both unconscious matter as well as the material manifestations of it<sup>8</sup>. This concept became personified as a goddess, *Sakti*, whose close relationship to the God is emphasized through their marriage with the notion that while she inheres in him, she is also a separate entity. If the goddess in the shrine is indeed Maha/Sri/Lakshmi and is Tantric, as suggested here, then it would imply that here, it is the goddess who is more powerful than the male god. As *Sakti* she is both his thought and action and her composite set of attributes combines the energies of both Siva and Vishnu.

### 5.3.1 Tantra and Yantra at Prasat Kravan

According to Pancharatra<sup>9</sup> texts (which were known in Cambodia), Mahalakshmi plays a central role in the creation and evolution of the world. White (2003, p. 21) says that in Tantric clans, great Goddesses were independent sources of life and energy and were not married. The fact that she was represented in a separate tower at Prasat Kravan suggests the (Maha)Lakshmi’s independent status as a god. Moreover, her diagrammatic alignment with the two

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<sup>8</sup>For a discussion on the nature of *sakti* see Gupta (1991, pp. 205–208).

<sup>9</sup>A branch of Vaishnavism in which Lakshmi, along with Vishnu takes on an important cosmological role (Kinsley, 1997, p. 227). This differs from the traditional role of Lakshmi as Vishnu’s obedient and submissive wife.

other deities further strengthens the Tantric overtones of this shrine. The position of the three goddesses trace the outline of a triangle, a geometric shape that represents the *yonī* or “feminine energies” (White, 1998, p. 185). The significance of this pattern lies in the incorporation of *yantra* in temple design and construction; for example, the *Silpa Prakasa* written between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries by Ramachandra Kulachara mentions several *yantra* to be consecrated and deposited in various parts of the temple (White, 1998, pp. 184–185). Dallapiccola (2002) defines *yantra* as a diagram which is believed to contain magical powers and used to aid in meditation. She elaborates that all deities have their own *yantra* into which they “descend” when it is meditated upon. A *yantra* could also be described as a visual instrument that aids in the achievement of enlightenment. Rawson (1973, pp. 69–70) suggests that as *mantra* can be understood as a “...nucleus or gathering point for energy” using syllables, *yantra* is a visual analogue to that concept. He observes that *yantra* maybe made of different materials such as diagrams, colored pastes or powders on the floor, drawn on paper or made in a more concrete material form. Importantly Rawson (1973, p. 71) points out that the human body is also often called the ‘best of yantras’. Therefore a *yantra* could be a sculpture, an inscription placed at a doorway, a diagram or the human body, anything that guides the Tantric practitioner to achieve liberation. Here at Prasat Kravan, we can consider the function of a *yantra* in the wider sense of the term, as a diagram, as images, and how these images interact with the devotee at the site.

According to the *Silpa Prakasa* text, one of the blue-prints, called the yogini *yantra* is to be installed below the womb-chamber or *garba griha* and consists of intersecting downturned and upturned triangles (White, 1998). The impact of the *yantra*-like design of the Prasat Kravan shrine is further enhanced through

the presentation of the images and its ambient environment. As much as the soaring towers of temples evoked a sense of awe and power of the ruler, so too the womb-like inner enclosure with its immense images flickering in the dim lights might have created a feeling of being surrounded by the immanent presence of the divine. The images of the three goddesses, like the Vishnu images, are not placed at eye-level. The feet of the deities stand a few feet above the bottom of the wall and therefore they tower over the viewer. Standing in the *garba griha* one is indeed dwarfed by the presence of these deities. Unlike the ruins of today, this temple was once a whole, completed structure, and a site of active worship. In the flickering of lamps, these imposing, unbroken and solid images would have given the impression of moving and emerging from the walls, and enveloping the worshiper within its folds. If this was the intention of the designing and placement of the images, it would have accentuated and emphasized the potency and energy of the divine images. The presence of the deities is no longer restricted just to the solid structure of the temple but it also permeates the sacred space within the temple and others who occupy it. As Diana Eck (1998) mentions in her book 'Darsan', seeing (and I would add, perceiving) is a kind of touching. In the context of Prasat Kravan, I would suggest that 'seeing' can be interchanged with 'perceiving' with the same result. Eck (1998) reaches the same conclusion as Stella Kramrisch (cited in Eck, 1998, p. 9) who said "Seeing... is going forth of the sight towards the object. Sight touches it and acquires its form. Touch is the ultimate connection by which the visible yields to being grasped. While the eye touches the object, the vitality that pulsates in it is communicated". Hudson (2008, p. 6) wrote that a temple was meant to transform the consciousness of the devotee, and that the monument was designed "to seize their six senses of touch, taste, sight, hearing, smell, and

thought, and then focus them on Deva or God, who is the subject of every spoken word and material form". In a similar manner, a haptic experience at Prasat Kravan would enable the devotee to be corporeally and spiritually transformed and, through the ensuing interaction, carry the deity in his/her person.

The notion of permeability between entities continues to be a significant aspect of other Southeast Asian cultures as well. For example, Linda Connor Connor (1982) points out that Balinese texts avoid the mind-body dualism, an approach that translates, for example, into therapeutic practices for treating madness. Using case studies, Connor (1982, pp. 253–263) elaborates that a "more fundamental ordering" can be traced to Sanskrit origins where there is a distinction between the microcosmos (*buwana alit*) and macrocosmos (*buwana agung*). Further, not only are there counterparts for the macrocosmos in the microcosmos but that they also constantly interact and transform each other with no predetermined direction of causation (Connor, 1982, p. 259). Connor also explains that in Bali, the human body is believed to be the receptacle for supernatural forces influencing the functioning of the person in diverse ways. As the author (Connor, 1982, p. 263) explains, it would appear that "the Balinese 'person' is not an isolated, indivisible unit but is rather a nexus of interacting forces, macrocosmic and microcosmic, natural and supernatural...". Wiener (1995, pp. 54–55) mentions that the study of texts that discuss even the most esoteric cosmological themes have the ability to confer power to those who study them. Geertz argues that *buwana agung*, *buwana alit* and other "imaged ideas" of Balinese state rituals like the *padmasana* (lotus seat) of the god, *lingga* (his phallus) and *sekti* (his energy) are apposed symbols<sup>10</sup>. Geertz (1980, pp. 107–108) explains that these symbols can be classified as *jaba* (outside) and *jero* (inside) that are essen-

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<sup>10</sup>See Geertz (1980, pp. 104–107).

tially demarcated from each other; *buwana agung* lies outside the dominion of the soul whereas *buwana alit* lies within<sup>11</sup>. Geertz's description implies a division that is impermeable<sup>12</sup> which needs the state ritual to symbolically match or resemble each other. Although Geertz does suggest that these elements are brought to relate to each other, Connor's argument (certainly Mus' when he talks about the relationship between the divinities, humans and objects) implies an ever-present state of permeability or at least one where boundaries are not so structured.

### 5.3.2 Differences between *Silpa Prakasa* and Prasat Kravan design

Coming back to the *yantra* design, it has to be pointed out that there are differences between the *Silpa Prakasa* text and the graphics of the Prasat Kravan shrine. Typically, the traditions using the material *yantra* are Saivite and not Vaishnavite and they usually included both the masculine as well as the feminine principles, and Prasat Kravan by all indications was Vaishnavite. Unlike other *yantra* the one at Prasat Kravan does not have a diagrammatic representation of Siva, and all the energies represented on it are exclusively feminine. On the other hand, the Maha/Sri/Lakshmi does hold the trident which is a distinctly Saivite attribute. Could this triad have represented the three members

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<sup>11</sup>Geertz proceeds to list other such divisions: "So is body to mind, countryside to settlement, circle circumference to circle center, word to meaning, gesture to sentiment, sound to music, coconut shell to coconut juice and...lotus petal where Siva's manifestations sit to lotus heart where he (or his lingga) himself sits" (Geertz, 1980, p. 108).

<sup>12</sup>Geertz uses the term "packets" to describe the sets of symbols which is suggestive of a certain impenetrability between them.

of the Sakta trinity, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswathy and Mahakali? The reliefs in their present state provide no solid clues but the representation emphasizes the Tantric orientations of the shrine and certainly of the four-armed goddess. A similar set of intersecting triangles can be traced inside the Vishnu shrine as well. Was this meant to evoke the female principle within the confines of a temple dedicated to a male god? That would be in keeping with the Tantric notion of the female as the source of power and would strengthen the suggestion that the four-armed goddess was perhaps Mahalakshmi or *sakti*, the source of any god's energy and thought. But in the light of the scanty evidence this suggestion for now must remain tentative.

#### 5.4 Significance of Maha/Sri/Lakshmi

What is the relevance of this image individually and in relation to the Vishnu images in the central sanctuary? Certain gods and goddesses held special symbolism in the Khmer context. For example, inscriptional and visual clues often associate Siva with ascetism and dance, Vishnu with kingly qualities and Lakshmi, or Sri as she was also known, with the earth and territory which was intimately connected to political authority. Royal women descending from illustrious families were compared to the "venerable Earth"<sup>13</sup>. The 10<sup>th</sup> century Pre Rup inscription<sup>14</sup> contains many references to the divine feminine as well

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<sup>13</sup>See verse XI in the Pre Rup inscription in Coedès (1937, p. 107) and Jacobsen (2008, pp. 28, 50–52).

<sup>14</sup>This is the longest Sanskrit inscription of the Angkor period, composed in exquisite language, with numerous puns, descriptions and allegories. Like other Sanskrit inscriptions of the Angkor period, this particular one also features several references to Indian mythology and religion, but uses them in fascinating ways to highlight local beliefs and contemporary events.

as the masculine. The king is identified as the son whose mother is like Sri, and whose father is the husband of Sri (Cœdès, 1937, p. 107). Note the focus on the mytho-genealogical ascendancy of the feminine. In another verse, the king is accorded a higher status than even Siva, since the former was endowed with incomparable Sri (whose name translates to Fortune)<sup>15</sup>. The inscription also reveals that royal women as well as the divine feminine were compared to the Earth and kings were likened to gods and the sky (Cœdès, 1937). One of the most vivid and compelling expressions illuminating the connection between the goddess and the earth (as the earth) is found in the Pre Rup inscription,

Reddened by the coat of spreading blood of the vanquished kings, having for a garland the fallen arrows and for a crown the loosened pearls (from the ornaments of the kings), the battlefield of the victor looks like a portrait of Lakshmi who has obtained as her consort the victorious king, passionate in battle.

Cœdès 1937, p. 117.

In this spectacular description, Lakshmi (or the earth) emerges as the personification of the king's victory over his enemies<sup>16</sup> and adorned with blood and pearls, obtains this king as her consort. This particular passage also recalls an ancient South Indian belief where it was posited that the feminine earth can

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<sup>15</sup>Cœdès (1937, p. 112).

<sup>16</sup>This is not the only reference connecting the feminine with the battle field. For example, in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century a court official erected an image of a queen under the name of *kanlong kamraten an Jayamaheshwari* in the 'field of victory' which Jacobsen (2008, p. 50) interprets as a battlefield. Jacobsen points out that the same inscription also refers to victory over 'Champa and others'. This queen was perhaps referred to in a later inscription as *kamraten an sri jayakshetra* which translates to 'holy queen of the field of victory'.



bring forth life only when she is offered a sacrifice of male blood-seed through war and vegetal offering (White, 2003, p. 70). White explains “The essential component of many of these rites is the feeding or offering of ritual equivalents of vital or sexual fluids to these goddesses as a means to restoring their energy, which is primarily sexual, and which expresses itself in the emission, the counterprestation of *their* sexual fluids, the source of fertility”. White’s work pertains to South Asia and it is very important to recognize the danger of conveniently applying select elements from Indian Tantric practices to a different context. But it is also necessary to recognize the universality of certain concepts such as the veneration for the earth and its life-giving powers, symbolism of fluids such as water and blood. Therefore the occurrences of similar concepts in Cambodia need not necessarily be accorded an Indian origin but could gesture towards the universality of certain ideas and beliefs.

Further, in the Pre Rup inscription, the body of the goddess (the earth) is a composite creation<sup>17</sup>, made up of blood, arrows and pearls, effects of war and, paraphrasing Grosz (1994), constitutes not (just) a map of the body but the body itself as a map or a narrative of events. The feminine body, as the Pre Rup verse reveals, is a site of political and cultural constitution. The notion of connectedness of the body and the land is not unique to Cambodia; McGowan (2008, pp. 246–249) talks about the mapping of the human body onto the land in the context of deposit boxes that animate shrines in Bali. She points out about how the human body is believed to constitute the same elements that make up

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<sup>17</sup>A 6<sup>th</sup> century Pallava inscription contains a similar imagery of a composite female but in this particular instance she is portrayed in a submissive manner, who was ravaged by a victorious king Simhavarman: “It was he who in his full power ravished the land of the Colas, that Lady whose necklace is the Kaveri river, whose veil is the field of paddy and sugarcane, whose lovely belt is the groves of areca nut and plantains” (Pollock, 2006, p. 121).

the universe; deposit boxes (containing various metal pieces, precious stones, plants and seeds) placed in temples contained both earthly and divine elements that animated the temple.

Another facet of the relationship between monument and image relates to the specific connection between Maha/Sri/Lakshmi who symbolizes the earth on which the shrine stands. As White (2000, p. 17) says, the world “is the body of goddess and its myriad religious landscapes her many physical features”. McGowan (2008, p. 241) points out, “the effect of cosmology on built forms, the belief that there exists a magic relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between the human body and the natural world” has been a dominant theme in many Southeast Asian cultures, particularly in Cambodia. At Prasat Kravan, the goddess’ feet face the earth below on whose “body” rests the temple, the built form. This juxtaposition of the two entities also suggest a permeability of the two forms—monument and earth. Wiener (1995, p. 55-56) argues that in Bali, certain geographical locations are believed to have special energies and these sites are chosen to build temples, palaces and priestly residences. Objects that are found in such places are thought to be endowed with distinct powers. The foundations of Prasat Kravan reach into the womb of the earth drawing its energies from within that sanctify the form. Simultaneously the earth is infused with the sanctity of the monument itself. There is an exchange of energies between the (feminine) earth and the built forms, with the earth saturating the images, including those of Vishnu, with her sacred potency. Bernard Groslier (1966, p. 13) commented that much like the embankment of the rice-field fitted closely with the river bank, or the village arranged along the river bank, the temple “outlined against the horizon crouches on the soil from which it derives its magic power...”. In the Indian context, Bosch (1960,

pp. 231–235) explains that in Hindu mythology, all creatures (humans, animals and birds) and plants are connected to the Cosmic Tree, which is rhizomatic in structure having no clear end or beginning<sup>18</sup>. Humans seem independent of inanimate objects to a certain extent and yet “with each of them he shares one factor of paramount importance in that either participates in Life, the divine principle ever self-consistent, irrespective of the variety and multiplicity of its forms” (Bosch, 1960, p. 233). As human life is frail, fleeting and subject of old age, their sustenance and strength is derived through their connection to other objects (plants, animals) who distribute the elixir of life from the Tree of Life to humans. According to Bosch’s explanation, the Tree of Life is the fountainhead from which the elixir of life flows into humans, animals, plants and objects. In the context of Prasat Kravan, I argue that as in a rhizomatic structure (much like the lotus plant that Bosch cites) there is no clear origin or culmination point to the structure, rather an interconnected linkage of multi-directional branches; there was a constant exchange of energies between the built form and the en-

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<sup>18</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have also used the structure of the rhizome in their own work. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, in part inspired by Gregory Bateson’s work on Bali Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 21-22,158), oppose the hierarchical structuring of Western philosophical thought that set up the division between subject, concept and being. See also Massumi (1987, pp. xii-xiii). Using the analogy of root system to explain hierarchical arrangements, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 5) criticize the binary view where there needs to be a central “taproot” of thought and everything is anchored to this pivotal structure, giving rise to binaries such as subject and object, natural and spiritual reality. They proposed that the world cannot be ranked into discrete categories; instead they brought together multiple elements “without effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future rearranging”. A rhizome-like organization does not have a fixed order or point but can be connected to any other thing even of a different nature than its own. Grosz (1994, p. 3) argues that these perspectives are relevant to critique the study of gender dichotomies in the writings of Western feminists and philosophers.

ergies of the earth, much like the Pre Rup verse that suggests that the goddess, the earth and the remnants of war are no longer separate entities; the animate and inanimate form and transform each other<sup>19</sup>.

Another aspect of the three goddesses vis-a-vis the Vishnu reliefs at Prasat Kravan comes to light while contrasting their relative postures. Out of the three Vishnu images, two of them depict Vishnu in motion: as Vamana, he is shown as moving between the earth and the waters as he claims his three steps, and in the other, he is depicted as though he is flying through the air. Although Garuda's feet are placed on a pedestal, there is an undeniable sense of movement in the image suggestive of imminent flight or landing. In either case, there is a distinct impression of motion. By contrast, all three images of the goddesses are portrayed with their feet firmly planted on the ground. The seated worshipers at the feet of the deities draw attention to and emphasize this feature even more. Maha/Sri/Lakshmi's intimate connection to the earth is asserted once again by drawing this contrast between the two sets of images. Khmer kings, as the inscriptions often mention, were compared to Vishnu and the king's ability to increase his territorial possessions may have been linked to marriage alliances with women who symbolized land (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 28). For example, Jayavarman II married seven different women and Jacobsen (2008, pp. 28–30) suggests that these marriages connected the king to ruling families in all parts of Cambodia. Kingship was reckoned through female lines and royal women of the classical period were regarded as "representations and emanations of the land" (Jacobsen, 2008, pp. 50-52). Therefore it is also possible to

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<sup>19</sup>Similarly, Hudson (2008, p. 6) in his description of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Pallava temple the Vaikuntaperumal, described the monument *as* the body of the god to whom the monument was dedicated. Vishnu, lived in the center of the temple in stone form, and at the same time was also the temple itself.

view the earth/Goddess at Prasat Kravan as representing both the foundation and source of the king's sovereignty.

#### 5.4.1 Fortunate kings and fickle fortunes

Kings, who gained political and economic might, were described as *sriman* which means "one who has/is blessed by Sri"<sup>20</sup>. Chandler (2000, p. 46) notes that the king whose "repeated and ritual enactment of lordliness and superiority in battle, sexuality, poetry, possessions, ceremony, and so forth" was likened more to a hero of an Indian epic. In the inscriptions, he was compared to gods and associated with the sky and the sun; the king was superhuman, a hero "occupying the top of society because of his merit and his power" (Chandler, 2000, *ibid*). He was also praised as being a "portion of Siva" (Cœdès, 1942, p. 213). But inscriptions also reveal that the king's power and authority was closely linked to him enjoying the constant blessing/presence of the earthly forces, which were identified as feminine<sup>21</sup>. That the focus of kings was to gain control of the earth even by force is revealed in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century inscription of Prasat Khna which states: The kings who had a long-time desire to ravish (Cœdès (1942, p. 211) uses the word *ravir* in his translation) the Earth by force saw that she was (protectively?) carried by this king, bowed their crowned heads to honor this master of the world.

Using references from Hindu religious texts, Julia Leslie (1991, pp. 112–

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<sup>20</sup>Both Harshavarman II and Rajendravarman were praised with this epithet in the 10<sup>th</sup> century inscription of Vat Kdei Car (Cœdès, 1954, p. 126).

<sup>21</sup>In an unusual instance, a verse in the Pre Rup inscription translated by Cœdès (1937, p. 127) also describes Sri/Fortune as "hardy as a man"

113) explains that Sri “represents an all-embracing power for fortune, a power sought after by gods, kings and ordinary human beings”. This considerable feminine force was not something that the king could always possess at will. In fact, Khmer inscriptions ((Coedès, 1937, p. 128)) mention that Fortune or Sri would have to be earned by the king, often after displaying his prowess on the battlefield. Verse CLXXVI states that unlike the Sri who was obtained by Vishnu from the ocean, this Sri was acquired by the king from the battlefield<sup>22</sup>. After gaining the Earth, the king protects her like a treasure<sup>23</sup>. Having earned her trust through his fidelity and military prowess, she becomes a constant presence with him. The Khmer king Jayavarman I is praised as the king “to whom the fickle goddess of fortune, Lakshmi, is firmly attached” (Aeusrivongse, 1976, p. 126). As the inscription mentions, there is also a side to Sri/Lakshmi that suggests instability and even submissiveness. An anecdote from the Mahabharatha posits that by her association with Fortune (described as ‘female qualities’) Lakshmi is also fickle and unstable. Lakshmi was so much in awe of the purity of cows that she asked to reside in some of their body parts. But the cows first refused on account of her fickle nature. Eventually Lakshmi had to beg the cows, and they finally relented, allowing her to reside in their urine and dung, stating that every part of the cow was considered pure (Leslie, 1991, pp. 112-113). This characteristic of Sri is implied in the Khmer Sanskrit inscriptions too: Sri would only be associated with those (kings) who were successful and victorious in battle, and the defeat of enemies was a sign of the departure of Sri from their side. For example, verse IV in the Prasat Neang Khmau inscription (tentatively dated to 928 C.E.) reads: Startled by the violent blow of the victorious king’s sword

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<sup>22</sup>See also verse XXXVIII from the 11<sup>th</sup> century Prasat Khna inscription, part B in Coedès (1937, p. 211).

<sup>23</sup>Coedès (1937, p. 112).

on the chest of his enemy (where she resided) hastened with joy to take refuge on the lotus-like chest of the victor (Cœdès, 1942, p. 33)<sup>24</sup>. Are these instances of fickleness or those of exercising her independent decision? Did the labeling of Sri as fickle arise out of an expectation of the feminine to stay loyal to her male consort even in the face of danger? These lines of inquiry, which unfortunately cannot be followed through in the present format, might reveal more facets about the creation of gender identity for the divine feminine in Hindu mythology.

#### 5.4.2 Conclusion

At Prasat Kravan, Maha/Sri/Lakshmi's Tantric associations suggest that she is theologically superior to Vishnu; as *sakti*, his thought and action, she endows him with power. By drawing out the relationship between landscape, built form and image, Maha/Sri/Lakshmi infuses and permeates everything with her sacred energies, thus blurring distinctions between the animate and inanimate, subject and object. Far from being an anomaly, the next set of images from Kbal Spean suggests that this crucial relationship between landscape and the material manifestations which reconstitutes the body and the feminine was perhaps a concept that was prevalent in the conceptualization of other temples in Angkorean Cambodia.

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<sup>24</sup>See also verse XL in the 11<sup>th</sup> century Prasat Khna inscription in Cœdès (1942, p. 211).

## 5.5 Kbal Spean

Kbal Spean is located in the Kulen Mountains, a sacred site for the Khmers even today. It was at Phnom (Mount) Kulen that Jayavarman II performed the *devaraja* ceremony, establishing himself as the ruler of the Angkor kingdom. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it was during this initiation ceremony that the priest Hiranyadama recited the four Hindu Tantric texts. The Kbal Spean river, which is a tributary of the Siem Reap river, flows through this region before cascading in a waterfall and descending into the valley of Siem Reap where it likely fed the numerous canals that criss-crossed the land, collected in pools and man-made moats and nourished the rice fields. Located about 15 miles (24 kilometers) north from the main Angkor group of temples, the site of Kbal Spean (literally “head bridge”)<sup>25</sup> remained unknown to Western scholars until 1968 when a hermit showed it to the French researcher Jean Boulbet<sup>26</sup>. The site contains several images including the anthropomorphic Siva and Parvati, their abstract forms of *linga* and *yoni*, Brahma and the reclining Vishnu and Lakshmi. All of these images are either carved directly on the riverbed or its rocky edges (Figure 5.10). During the monsoons, the water flows over some of these reliefs, completely submerging some while partially flowing around others (Fig-

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<sup>25</sup>The name is derived from a naturally formed broad block of sandstone which creates a bridge and the water flows around it (Freeman and Jacques, 2006, p. 217).

<sup>26</sup>Kbal Spean has not grabbed the attention of scholars and tourists as much as the other Angkorean monuments perhaps due to a lack of structural buildings like other Angkorean sites as well as its relatively remote location. After the 1973 and 1979 archaeological inventories compiled by Jean Boulbet and Bruno Dagens, Phnom Kulen will benefit from new archaeological projects such as the Phnom Kulen Archaeological Program launched in 2002 which will focus on the occupation of the site. Another program described by William A. Southworth in the first issue of the journal *Sikhsacakra* also aims to study the site for its archaeological potential.



ure 5.11), (Figure 5.12); the interplay of the water and images, illuminated by sunlight breaking through the overhanging tree branches lends a kinetic energy to the images. The focus of this study will be the Vishnu and Lakshmi images where the male god is depicted reclining on the serpent Ananta, and the god's consort Lakshmi seated at his feet. This representation, its location and the interaction of landscape with the images suggest the use of select Tantric ideas which were modified to highlight local beliefs. Like the Maha/Sri/Lakshmi at Prasat Kravan, the representation of the divine feminine at Kbal Spean underscores a facet of the divine feminine that was pivotal to the understanding of Khmer religious art. I will also argue that the divine feminine at Kbal Spean, despite its supernatural and cosmological association, is also fundamentally linked to economic production and political power.



Figure 5.10: Images at Kbal Spean, 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia.



Figure 5.11: Water flowing around the reclining Vishnu and Lakshmi representation at Kbal Spean <http://www.webcitation.org/5uhrV9zwg>.



Figure 5.12: Submerged images of Vishnu and Lakshmi at Kbal Spean <http://www.webcitation.org/5uhrnHj1N>.

## 5.6 The reclining Vishnu: iconographic variations

The representation of the reclining Vishnu and seated Lakshmi in Khmer iconography contain more or less the same stylistic elements with only a few variations. Vishnu reclines on his side with his left arm supporting his raised head. In Cambodia unlike most depictions in India, Vishnu is supported by his left hand in several depictions<sup>27</sup>. In the lotus that grows from Vishnu is seated Brahma, the god of creation<sup>28</sup> (Figure 5.11). Seated at Vishnu's feet is his consort Lakshmi. In the depictions at Kbal Spean and some others, she is surrounded by lotus blooms and buds. Both the goddess and her partner are seated on Ananta (meaning 'endless' or 'infinite') the seven-headed snake, who forms both a resting place and canopy for them<sup>29</sup>. In India, the reclining Vishnu image is known as Vishnu Anantasayin or Anantasayana. There are other differences between the Khmer and Indian depictions. In some cases like at the Shore Temple and the Mahishasuramardini cave at Mahabalipuram and the 7<sup>th</sup> century image found at Licchavi, Nepal, Vishnu lies on his back, a depiction that is almost certainly absent in Khmer art. Moreover, not all Indian depictions include Vishnu's consort Lakshmi. In some she is not shown at all (for example, in the Shore Temple). In some others, she is seated at a lower level, worshipping Vishnu (for example,

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<sup>27</sup>This has led to scholars like Vasudha Narayanan (2002, pp. 178–179) to term the Khmer type as the 'reverse reclining Vishnu'. There are exceptions, for example the representations at Angkor Wat, Phnom Kulen and the reliefs found at Phnom Da and Manglaratha show Vishnu reclining on his right side.

<sup>28</sup>This particular feature is absent in certain depictions. When it is depicted, the lotus is more often shown emerging from somewhere behind Vishnu and not his navel as mentioned in Hindu mythology.

<sup>29</sup>In some other Khmer depictions, Ananta is replaced by a dragon with feet, as in Banteay Samre and Preah Khan. See Figure A.6.

at Malayadipatti and the Mahishasuramardini cave) or, she is shown along with Vishnu's other consort Bhudevi (for example, at Mysore.). According to K.V.S. Rajan (1967), in some representation, Sri (or Lakshmi) is seated near Vishnu's head and Bhudevi at his feet<sup>30</sup>. Brahma is almost a constant in several South Indian representations, and most show Bhudevi but not Sri<sup>31</sup>.

## 5.7 Vishnu and Lakshmi: images in water and earth

The striking characteristic of Kbal Spean is the extraordinary symbiosis of art and landscape (earth, water and sky), where the two directly inform and enrich each other's signification. The sculptures on the water bed are covered with flowing water, creating the unusual impression that these images are both in the water as well as on the bedrock. Moreover, when the river is swollen by rainfall, the water laps around some of the reliefs, beautifully re-creating the image of Ananta, with Vishnu, Lakshmi and Brahma, floating on the cosmic sea that gives rise to all life<sup>32</sup>. (Figure 5.11). These various elements transform the

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<sup>30</sup>See Rajan (1967, pp. 75–76).

<sup>31</sup>For images of the examples cited above, see Figures A.1, A.2, A.3, A.4 and A.5. For details on the variations of the Indian reclining Vishnu representations, see Rajan (1967).

<sup>32</sup>Walter Smith (1996) has argued that the image of the reclining Vishnu at the Mahabalipuram Shore temple was created to evoke the image of Vishnu on the cosmic ocean, incorporating natural elements, in this case, the sea (Bay of Bengal). According to Smith (1996, pp. 19–20), the fact that the icon was fashioned *in situ* out of living rock and the proximity of the sea might have been considered as an “extension of the image, evoking the cosmic sea upon which Visnu sleeps”. The proof he offers to suggest that the temple and the image itself were washed by the sea to re-create the imagery is problematic but even if a literary enactment of the imagery did not exist, the location of the temple and the orientation of the image towards the sea is suggestive enough for the evocation of the imagery.

site into what (Smith, 1996, p. 20) termed an “embodiment of divinities” .

Is Kbal Spean also a site in which the natural and cultural forms and manifestations flow through each other like at Prasat Kravan? If the earth was visualized as the body of the goddess (like in the verse from the Pre Rup inscription discussed in the previous section), then one way of viewing these images is to see them as as tattoos inscribed on her body. The relationship between the earth and the feminine is not new to Cambodia. The name ‘Sita’ or Neang Sida (who is Lakshmi’s incarnation) as she is known in Cambodia means ‘furrow of the earth’, signifying her creation from the earth itself. The Reamker, which is the Khmer version of the Ramayana, also mentions that Neang Sida returns to the earth itself. Therefore images sculpted on the earth are essentially texts which articulate these myriad connections and associations. Instead of looking at the images and the surface as separate, why not see them as a conjoined entity, much like tattoos contributes to the signification of the body and vice versa? As Eck (1998, p. 5) explains in the Indian context, a place (like the Himalayan peaks and the river Ganga) are considered by the devotees as “natural epiphanies of the divine” and not as separate elements. The sculpted images on the earth surrounded and embedded in the water transform an otherwise empty landscape into a site of religious signification and potency. But what are the reasons for the reverence for natural elements?

## **5.8 The sacred and profane aspects of landscape in Khmer culture**

The significance of the Kbal Spean site gains ground in the light of the new archaeological discoveries relating to water management in the Angkorean complex thanks to a recent path-breaking study (Evans et al., 2007; Fletcher et al., 2008) led by the Greater Angkor Project and the EFEO. This study essentially advanced the work of Victor Gouloubew and Bernard-Philippe Groslier, (Evans et al., 2007; Fletcher et al., 2008, cited in) of the EFEO who, in the 1950s proposed the theory of Angkor as a 'hydraulic city'. Meticulous surveys and radar imagery have revealed that the Angkor complex was spread over an expansive 1158 miles square area. This area was divided into three zones, where the northern zone (A) functioned as a collector and flow management system where the water coming down from the Kulen hills flowed through numerous channels directed towards the south (Fletcher et al., 2008) (Figure 5.13). Zone (B), which contained the barays and temple moats acted as water retention units (and perhaps had ritual functions as well) were fed by the collector system in the north. This middle section formed the "womb" of the kingdom, the seat of political, economic and sacred power. Finally the third zone (C) was a system of water distribution and dispersal out of the central zone and eventually into the Tonle Sap river. This elaborate water management system is now believed to have been designed to counter the unpredictability of seasonal rainfall. Therefore water harvesting and management was of immense importance for the sustenance of the vast kingdom. Apart from the elaborate water channels, this new study also located at least 74 more clearly identifiable temple sites scattered over the area.



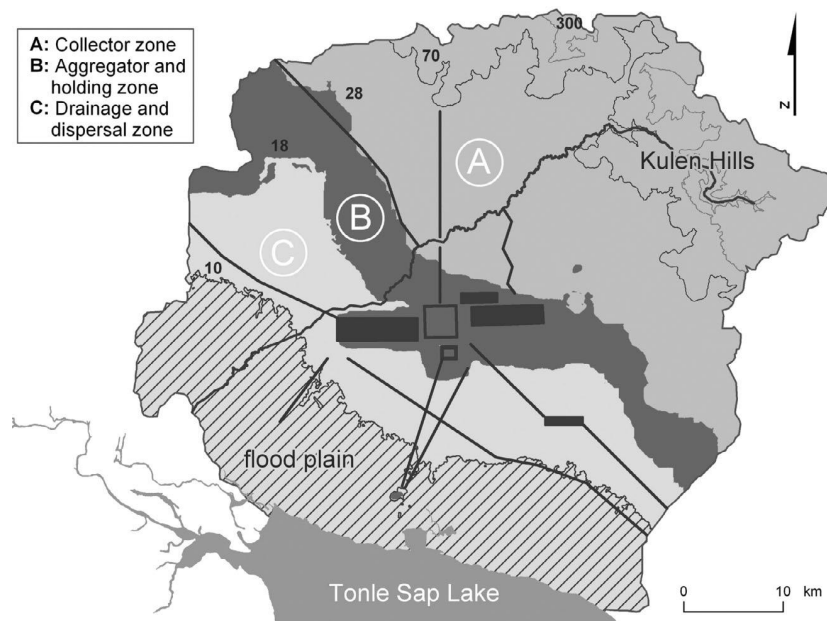


Figure 5.13: Tripartite water management network of Angkor (Fletcher et al., 2008).

### 5.8.1 Offering holy water to the gods

Cravath (2007) suggests that the harmony of water and earth forms the most important symbolic union in Khmer cosmology and which was central to the prosperity of the kingdom. The feminine earth<sup>33</sup>, latent with its fecundity combines with the masculine sky, the canvas on which the sun, clouds, lightning and thunder play out their roles; earth and sky are connected by water which falls as rain from the sky onto the earth in an encircling act of life[Get ref from Seth]. These ideas are reflected even today in Khmer performance traditions as was discussed in the previous chapter. The sacred nature of water is further referred to in a late 9<sup>th</sup> century inscription where king Indravarman, at the in-

<sup>33</sup>Cravath (2007, p. 94) mentions that rain that fell from the sky was characterized as male in relation to the feminine earth whereas ground water was feminine vis-a-vis the masculine mountain.

vation of the head priest of an ashram, installed a *linga* which was drawn up from the water<sup>34</sup>. Presumably, this was a self-formed *linga* or a *svyambhu linga*, considered specially sacred in itself but perhaps now doubly so because it was endowed with the fecund powers of the water. Much like rice fields and land, rivers, lakes and ponds are also mentioned among the donations given to temples<sup>35</sup>; a pre-Angkorean inscription also mentions water (Coedes translated this as “pieces of water”) offered to various gods including Svyambhu and Sankaranarayana (Cœdès, 1954, pp. 38–39).

At Kbal Spean economic and religious motivations find a conjoint and cooperative expression. Are the religious representations only symbols of a ritualized polity or are the depictions intrinsically adhered to practice, for example, as “live” offerings or a ritual itself that would catalyze economic production? Geertz (1980, pp. 122–123) argues that in the context of classical Bali, notions that tie symbology with practice of statecraft is Western and therefore obscures our vision and understanding of Balinese polity. According to him, the axis of the Balinese state was the “seat” or position, place, title and rank of the people, defined in terms of its differing distance from divinity that enlivened most emotions and acts. These emotions described not the workings but the poetics of power. As Geertz described it, “The state drew its force, which was real enough, from its imaginative energies...” (Geertz, 1980, p. 123). Geertz (1980, pp. 128–129) also argues that the *negara adat* or ‘custom community’ was solely a religious unit and not political, economic or social. The king in his capacity as head of the *adat*, also owned it. Like a god, the king ensured the prosperity of the kingdom; working through the “motor” of state ceremony, he was

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<sup>34</sup>See verse XXXV of the Bakhong stele in Cœdès (1937, p. 35).

<sup>35</sup>See the Neak Buos inscription in Cœdès (1954, p. 26).



the guardian of the land. The ceremonial splendor was reflective of the king's powers which in turn were reflected by the wealth that was assembled during these ceremonies as well as the population from whom the wealth was collected. On the other hand, Margaret Wiener (Wiener, 1995) suggests that in the Balinese context the distinction between the visible and spiritual realms was blurred, and in fact spiritual relations made it possible for a person to assert his/her authority in the real world. Moreover, landscape in Bali, including hills and rivers were believed to be filled with numerous spirits who would manifest themselves in certain circumstances, and these invisible spirits also appear "unusually close to the world of humans"<sup>36</sup>.

In the context of Cambodia, Boisselier (1970) argued that Neak Pean (pronounced Neak Poan), the enigmatic monument built by Jayavarman VII before the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century exemplified the conjoint political and religious forces of the time<sup>37</sup>. The water body at the site could have represented Lake Anavatapta, which was located in the Himalayas and was the source of the three sacred rivers of India, the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati (Boisselier, 1970, p. 96). Buddhist sources tell us that Lake Anavatapta is believed to endure until

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<sup>36</sup>Wiener (1995, pp. 44–46) points out that Klungkung appeared to be more populated with spirits than other districts such as Badung and Gianyar. Klungkung was also the location for the infamous massacre of about two hundred Balinese men, women and children by the Dutch soldiers in 1908. With that, Klungkung (then one of two realms independent of the Dutch) passed into the hands of the colonial rulers. Wiener (1995, pp. 47–48) also mentions that a large number of ancestral temples and origin points (or "sources") of significant Balinese clans were located in Klungkung.

<sup>37</sup>The site consists of an artificial island built in the center of an artificial lake. The central lake where the sanctuary is located is surrounded by four other smaller ponds. The circular central tower is embraced by two entwined serpents. The ponds and lake are fed by an intricate system of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic fountains.

the end of time and that those who own the waters, would be endowed with the highest degree of magical power. This water was therefore indispensable for the coronation of a *chakravartin*, or ruler of the world. By recreating the site in Cambodia, Boisselier (1970, p. 98) argued that Jayavarman VII was stating that like the Himalayas, Cambodia had now become the abode of the gods until the end of time. Moreover, during this period, the Khmer rulers would have access to universal power since they were the sole owners of this lake. Neak Pean, was much more than a site that recalled a Buddhist belief. Archaeological excavations also unearthed Vaishnavite and Saivite imagery, like the reclining Vishnu and a group of *linga*, much like the representations at Kbal Spean and Phnom Kulen. Boisselier (1970, pp. 100–101) suggests that this could be interpreted as an attempt by Jayavarman VII to revitalize the older royal cults in conjunction with the more definitive Buddhist foundation of power; in other words, he constructed a synthesis of past and current sources of power which would ensure the longevity and prosperity of his kingdom. As Wiener argued in the case of Bali, I would also argue that power is acquired by “producing or reproducing connections with the invisible world of spirits”, through interactions with certain places or objects that are invested with spiritual energies<sup>38</sup>. Objects such as art, inscriptions, architecture or sacred geography were not just symbols but actually produced power when they articulated notions of warfare, cultural constructions of gender, fertility and prosperity<sup>39</sup>. I would argue that Neak Pean was not merely a symbol of power but that by its presence in Cambodia, it was believed to actually be a localized entity of not only a Buddhist source of power (Lake Anavatapta) but also Saivite (like Kbal Spean and Phnom Kulen, recalling the association with the coronation of Jayavarman II at the

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<sup>38</sup>See Wiener (1995, p. 13).

<sup>39</sup>See Wiener (1995, p. 14).

site) and Vaishnavite (as in the great monuments of West Mebon and Angkor Wat, built by his illustrious ancestors Suryavarman I and II respectively). Their physical presence would sanctify the land and the devotees who came to pay respects at its site<sup>40</sup> At Kbal Spean, the combination of landscape and built form also spoke to connections with pre-Hindu local ancestral spirits in addition to economic projects during the Angkor period.

### **5.8.2 Ancestral spirits of Earth and Water**

In 1969, Jean Boulbet, the first Westerner to encounter Kbal Spean, wrote about the association of this site with the supernatural. Boulbet (1979) noted that the villagers believed this site to possess magical powers and that the images consecrated the water that flowed from here into the Siem Reap valley. The reverence for the forces of nature seems to have been a significant component of the local culture both in Cambodia as well as in many parts of Southeast Asia. Aeusrivongse (1976, pp. 111-112) argued that in pre-Hinduized Bali, people believed that the spirits of their ancestors lived in the hidden sources of rivers on mountains whose waters were vital to the growth of rice. Further, these ances-

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<sup>40</sup>The presence of pools and man-made lakes close to palaces in Indonesia testify to the sanctity of water in Java and Bali (Jessup, 1990, p. 120–129). Jessup (1990) says that these palace pools (some of them rain-fed and following natural formations) had both ritual and practical functions. Often there were cave-like structures built close to them, that could have been places for meditations and purification. Archaeological findings have revealed the existence of ingenious waterworks systems at the palace locations. The reverence for water is evident in many rituals in Java and Bali, for example the purification ceremony after cremation. As argued in Chapter 2, water flowing out of temples set on the slopes of mountains were believed to be endowed with special powers.

tral spirits also bestowed magical “life-power” to animals, humans and plants. The presence and blessing of ancestral spirits were also essential to cure epidemics that inflicted people and calm flooded streams. Aeusrivongse (1976, pp. 114-115) also mentioned that gods of specific sites, for example on top of mountains, despite having Indian names may have in fact, referred to autochthonous deities<sup>41</sup>. As Aeusrivongse (1976, p. 123) states “the ancestral spirit could not be ignored because the force of the belief remained strong and the Hindu god was ambivalently related to the ancestors—male ancestors with gods, female ancestors with goddesses”. I suggest that the existence of these beliefs created a conducive atmosphere for the adaptation of select Tantric ideas at Kbal Spean. But the connections between Tantra, Vaishnavite imagery and local beliefs may not seem obvious at first.

## 5.9 The multiple personalities of Lakshmi

The association between Tantra and Vaishnava traditions is not common, at least in India. Gupta (1991) observes that while Saiva tantra tradition allows for autonomy of the feminine, such is not the case for Vishnu’s *sakti*. In Indian mythology, Lakshmi (particularly in the representation of the reclining Vishnu) has been accorded a very specific status. Gupta says: “Iconographically, Visnu’s *sakti* (Laksmi) is almost never depicted alone or in a terrifying form. She is the idealization of the model Hindu wife. Even in non-sectarian circles, Laksmi appears as the ideal, loving and serving wife as, for example, in the popular

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<sup>41</sup>A stele from Basak mentions a god named Vakakakeshwara which does not correspond to any Indian deity and therefore could actually denote a local god. See the reference in (Cœdès, 1942, pp. 58–61).

depiction of Visnu floating on the cosmic waters asleep on his serpent-couch, eternally attended by his wife" (Gupta, 1991, pp. 195–199). According to the author, although Vishnu's *sakti* is present as Lakshmi, she always remains under his control as his meek wife, "deprived of her explicit dynamism and her nature as God's energy"<sup>42</sup>. Wives who aspire to ensure health, prosperity and long-life for their households should worship Sri (Leslie, 1991, p. 111). The image of Lakshmi massaging Vishnu's feet as in the Kbal Spean and such other Indian representations was pointed out as proof of her devotion and worship of her husband.

### 5.9.1 Lakshmi and her Tantric connections

Is it possible that a deity predominantly known for her docility can embody Tantric notions? Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1980, p. 9) suggests that in complex areas like mythology, "any general statement will be either incorrect or uselessly vague and banal". Further, while elaborating on Khmer interpretations of Indic notions Polkinghorne (2007, p. 3) says that 'meaning' is contextual and individual and there is no single 'ideal' shared by all. In that spirit, it is necessary to view gods and goddesses as multi-faceted, whose signification is dependent on their specific cultural and religious contexts. The danger to reductionism, that is, in rejecting a pluralistic approach is that it will preclude us not only from appreciating the complexities of the icons but also from understanding processes like localization like at Kbal Spean.

One particular Tantric aspect of Lakshmi pertains to the myth of the churn-

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<sup>42</sup>Gupta (1991, p. 209).

ing of the sea of milk, a popular depiction in numerous Khmer temples. According to Shaw (1994, pp. 151-152), the terms “churner and churned” is a metaphor for sexual union in Tantric tradition. In the myth of the churning of the sea, the gods and *asura* churn the sea of milk to extract the nectar of immortality. According to the Puranic myth it is Lakshmi who emerges from the sea, while Shaw (1994) uses the term *sakti* instead. She says, “Thus the churning yogic partner, which stimulates the flow of her nectar, mirrors the stirring of cosmic ocean for its potent, liberating nectar. Thus the metaphor of churning, which appears to be a simple physical analogy, resonates richly with various nuances of Tantric union” (Shaw, 1994, p. 152). Shaw (1994, pp. 154-155) also suggests that the method of worshipping the feminine was also articulated in terms of worshipping the female organ, metaphorically represented as a lotus<sup>43</sup>. One of Sri/Lakshmi’s attributes is the lotus bloom. At Kbal Spean her image is surrounded by lotus flowers and buds. As Gajalakshmi, she is usually seated on a lotus flanked by two elephants that shower her with water. Talking about the symbolism of Lakshmi’s lotus, Kinsley (1986, p. 21) says that the lotus, rooted in and taking strength from the primordial waters, it is a symbol of fertility and life.

According to Cravath, the Churning relief depicts one of the fundamental notions in Khmer religious culture, the duality of the Masculine and Feminine through the union of the king with the waters, through the symmetrical equanimous action of churning by the two sides. Although Cravath does not explicitly state it, the Tantric overtones to his explanation are obvious. While explaining the term *kulamrta*<sup>44</sup> or *kula*-nectar, Agehananda Bharati (1993) says that the con-

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<sup>43</sup>The lotus is also a Buddhist symbol of purity and enlightenment which, she asserts, makes this flower a “natural symbol for the vulva”.

<sup>44</sup>White (2003, p. 11) explains that according to the Tantric word view “the godhead—the

troversial term has many interpretations, one of which is related to the churning of the sea of milk and the goddess who emerges from it, Sri/Lakshmi. The explanation given to Bharati by a tantric was: “the *kulamtra* is nothing but the *amrta* (nectar) produced by the churning of the milk ocean, but it would not have any special significance for the *sadhakas* (loosely translated to “practitioners”) were it not for the fact that Sakti herself, in form of the maiden, was the main product of the tantrics, must be worshiped along with the foundation...from which she originated, which is the *kula*-nectar, i.e. it is *amrta* (nectar) for the *kula*, those initiated in the tantric tradition (*kulamrta*)” (Bharati, 1993, pp. 259–260). Seen in the light of this explanation, the body of the goddess becomes life-giving food for her devotees. The image of Lakshmi at Kbal Spean, fully submerged and yet visible through the swirling waters, which then flows into the rice-fields in the valley below gesture towards her Tantric connections with the myth of the Churning of the Sea of Milk.

## 5.10 The fusion of local beliefs and Tantra at Kbal Spean

A Khmer myth that resonates strongly with Tantric beliefs and practices is recounted by the Chinese traveler Chou Ta-Kuan who visited Cambodia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote,

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source of all being and power in the world—externalized himself...in the form of a series of female hypostases, a cluster of (often eight) great Goddesses, who in turn proliferated into the multiple circles of feminine energies (often sixty-four) that were their Yogini entourage. These semidivine Yoginis and the human women who embodied them therefore carried in their bodies the germ plasm of the godhead called the “clan fluid” (*kuladravyam*), “clan nectar” (*kulamrta*), “vulval essence” (*yonitattva*)...or the “clan” (*kula*). See also White (2003, p. 6,22).

Out of the palace rises a golden tower, to the top of which the ruler ascends nightly to sleep. It is a common belief that in the tower dwells a genie, formed like a serpent with nine heads, which is lord of the entire kingdom. Every night this genie appears in the shape of a woman, with whom the sovereign couples...Should the genie fail to appear for a single night, it is a sign that the king's death is at hand. If, on the other hand, the king should fail to keep his tryst, disaster is sure to follow.

Ta-Kuan 1992, p. 5.

The spirit of the land is therefore both male and female; perhaps one identity assumes greater intensity in particular contexts while the other fades but always remains in the background. It is with this heterogenous spirit that the king has to unite in order to ensure his vitality and that of his kingdom, a theme that Jean Pryzluski (Cravath, 2007, cited in) suggests is indigenous to the Austronesian world<sup>45</sup>. Cravath (2007, p. 48) quotes a Khmer inscription cited in Groslier's book (Groslier and Arthaud, 1966) which declares that "The earth in intimate union with the passionate vital principle of this king brought forth untold riches". The interaction between the male and female elements in Hindu philosophy as elucidated by Bosch (1960, p. 50, pp. 60–61) is such that each component (male: creative breath, female: inert mass) is barren by itself but it is only when interacting with each other that life springs forth as *Hiranyagarbha* the Golden Germ. Bosch also says that this Golden Germ unites both the contrasting natures within itself but their distinctiveness is nevertheless retained.

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<sup>45</sup>Similar legends exist in Champa, Funan, Sumatra and several parts of India. Pryzluski (Cravath, 2007, cited in) suggests that the source might have been in the Austronesian region and diffused to India and China.



Bosch's explanation suggests that that act involves the action of the male *on* the female, highlighting the inert nature of the female element. In the Khmer myth, however, the spirit of the land that is a conjoined entity, both male and female, and in its interaction with the king, assumes the form of a powerful female entity. In other words, the spirit of the land signifies a situation of a "flow" of identities implying a permeability of binaries.

Roy Jordaan mentions the existence of a similar myth in Javanese culture. In his article Jordaan (1997) he says that the ruler of Surakarta and Nyai Lara Kidul<sup>46</sup> had "amorous meetings" on the top floor of a twenty-eight meter tower called Pangung Sangga Buwana. Of special significance is a painting that hung in the room in the tower which depicted a man riding a snake which Timothy Behrend (whom Jordaan quotes) interpreted as a symbolic depiction of the relationship between the goddess and the king. Behrend (cited in Jordaan, 1997, p. 302) suggested that "riding" was a metaphor for sexual intercourse where the snake represented the chthonic nature of the queen. Additionally, Jordaan (1997) mentions that the myth about the Sultan of Yogyakarta who would meet Ratu Kidul in a room atop the tower of the Water Palace. Interestingly, the fertility goddess of the Cham also takes the form of a *naga*.

Could the myth described by Chou Ta-Kuan be seen as a comment on the older origin stories of Cambodia? In those myths, it was the union of an Indian and the *naga* princess that produced the Khmer people and together they ruled the land. Was the 13<sup>th</sup> century myth a subtle comment on the ultimate power of the autochthonous spirit over the "foreign" element? The Khmer myth sug-

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<sup>46</sup>Jordaan (1997, p. 302) also suggests that Nyai Lara Kidul symbolized the autochthonous spirit of Java who, at one point was associated with the Hindu goddesses Durga and Dewi Sri, and was also known as Ratu Kidul, a deity who might have been a snake goddess.

gests the innate powerlessness of the king and his dependence on the genie for his status, efficacy, and indeed, his very life. Not only that, there is also an implicit suggestion that even if the king were to appear in the tower to couple with the genie, she may not always be there; she would appear only until she deemed him worthy or perhaps only if she was so inclined at the time. This situation is comparable to the status of the Chola king and the women he was associated; the king in medieval South India emerges as faceless mask in his relationship with all the women associated him, including his wives and courtesans. The king is believed to enjoy an intimate connection with the Earth as her husband who will be “widowed” at her death but this relationship is somewhat ambiguous as the Earth has been “married” to several husbands before the present king and will therefore continue to have many “husbands” in the future (Shulman, 1985, pp. 303–304). The relationship between the king and the *vesya* (courtesan) in South India is complex and interesting. The *vesya*, like the *apsara* is associated with fertility and through her relationship with the king is responsible for the fertility and prosperity of the kingdom (Shulman, 1985, p. 307). But the *vesya* almost takes on the characteristic of a *sanyasin* in that she remains above any emotional involvement with the king to the point where the poet Kampan equated her impassivity to heartlessness. As Shulman (1985, p. 308) states, “Like the renouncer, the *vesya* should exemplify the virtues of absolute indifference”. No doubt, this was a frustrating situation for the king, who, as Shulman (1985, p. 310) points out, was “not cut out for dispassion” but rather is defined by an entire range of emotional experience. It is a relationship which renders the king rather powerless in his ability to connect with the feminine on an intimate, emotional level. Shulman suggests that the king’s relationship with the Earth and courtesans reinforces his already elusive and undermined status

in medieval South India<sup>47</sup>.

The Southeast Asian myths described earlier also envision a situation that called for an exchange or receiving of sacred fluids for the bond between the king and the spirit to be beneficial. According to White, an early form of Tantric Hinduism with its focus on sexualized ritual where a Virile Man *virā* (sometimes a king) would gain certain this-worldly powers through exchange of fluids from female ritual consorts or *yogini* was practiced in South Asia from around the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>48</sup>. He goes on to say that this form of Tantric Hinduism was the religion of the popular masses and practiced by certain dynasties in a “wide swath of

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<sup>47</sup>Shulman also comments on the brahmin’s role in restoring and maintaining the precarious status of the king. The king and brahmin share a brittle relationship where the former makes donations (*dana*) to the latter to absolve him of the acts of violence that are inevitably tied to kingship, and by those acts of donations the king acquires the necessary legitimation (Shulman, 1985, pp. 27–31). At times when the brahmin was unwilling to provide legitimation, the king acquired it from the god by making endowments to temples. This model is mirrored in other segments of the society, although in weaker forms, and in this way “Chola kings were bearers of the meaningfulness of life as understood by the people of their time” (Shulman, 1985, p. 11). The king, brahmin or god is always restricted within this circle of distribution. As one moves up the political structure, the strain of seeking legitimacy is increased. The king can claim power only by giving up more power and the brahmin for his part “hold even more firmly... with the ultimate Brahmin values of renunciation and purity—thus denying the political center the very legitimacy it seeks”. As Shulman (1985, p. 38) explains, “Power, in medieval South India, is won by conspicuous and ever-renewed powerlessness, self-impoverishment and ritual self-denial”.

<sup>48</sup>An 8<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist Hevajra Tantra verse is also reminiscent of the Southeast Asian myths: “Listen, O Goddess, to the service of worship. In a garden, in an uninhabited country, or within the inner chamber of one’s own dwelling, one possessed of yogic knowledge should always worship the naked “Great Seal” consort. Kissing and embracing her, and touching her vulva... He attains abundant *siddhi* and becomes the equal of all the Buddhas.” (White, 2003, p. 73).

central India” between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as in parts of Southeast Asia like Burma, Indonesia and Cambodia (White, 2003, pp. 7–12).

White (2003) also spotlights the importance of what he calls “power substances” in Tantric tradition. Female sexual fluids like urine and uterine blood were considered dangerous and polluting, requiring counterprestations of male “seed”. But in some other Indian traditions, the consumption of a mixture of male and female fluids (power substances) was an important moment in Tantric practice, bestowing great potency and also good health (White, 2003, pp. 74–75). Without the female fluids, the male practitioner of Tantra will not be able to access this potency. This substance is also represented as *prasada* (White translates this to “edible grace”) of Siva and the goddess in Siva temples, for instance, where that the “fluid offerings poured over the *lingam* run into the sculpted labia of the yoni, along which they are channeled through an opening in the northern wall of the temple shrine. There, these conjoined sexual fluids of the divine pair may be collected by devotees” (White, 2003, p. 101). The geographical location of Kbal Spean enables the dynamic fusion of the autochthonous male and female principles which are visually expressed in Indian vocabulary. Even if the origin of the idea of consumption of sexual fluids were traced back to India, existing local beliefs and myths in other cultures may have provided an ideal vocabulary for those ideas to be expressed in uniquely autochthonous ways.

### 5.10.1 King+princess+naga = Vishnu+Lakshmi+Ananta

We know that Khmer inscriptions often associated Khmer kings with Vishnu, and the earth as well as royal women with Sri/Fortune. The goddess Sri is also associated with the “liquids of sovereignty”, water and soma, the life-giving elixir and according to Tantric tradition, all life flows from the womb of the Goddess (White, 2003, pp. 32,79). Former kings and queens of Angkor were also believed to have joined the rank of ancestors whose images were objects of worship in temples and whose home was the source of rivers on mountains. Up on the mountains of Phnom Kulen, the churning and swirling waters over Vishnu and Sri/Lakshmi the images bring to life the energetic interaction of the male and female principles as in the Khmer myth. These images, set for all time in stone would also ensure the eternal attendance of the king/Vishnu in the presence of the princess/goddess which would in turn ensure the permanency of their blessing on the kingdom. As a verse from the Prasat Kandol Dom inscription states: “Having traversed the ocean of virtues, he permanently carries Lakshmi/Fortune (or “is continually blessed by Lakshmi/Fortune”), like another four-armed Vishnu” (Cœdès, 1937, p. 44). Elements of the natural world contribute immensely towards the constitution of meaning of the imagery. The waters would then carry their life-giving essences into the “womb” of the kingdom where the temples, palaces and rice-fields are located, to impregnate the land with its extraordinary powers. The water at Kbal Spean takes on the role of the activating agent facilitating the fusion and exchange of fluids between the male and female forces as well as carrying those potent fluids down into the valley. The depiction of the male *with* the female clearly indicate their conjoined significance at this site. Not only do the images themselves convey this notion, but the water flowing over them, blurring and obscuring the distinct bound-

aries between the male and the female deities express it in the most evocative terms. Miranda Shaw's description of the mind-body continuum as described by Buddhist Tantra exponents appropriately sums up this idea when she says that embodiment is a "multilayered mind-body continuum of corporeality, cognitivity, and spirituality whose layers are subtly interwoven and mutually interactive. This nonessentialist self is seen not as a boundaried or static unity but as a site of a host of energies, inner winds and flames, dissolutions, meltings, and flowings that can bring about dramatic transformations in embodied experience and provide a bridge between humanity and divinity" (Shaw, 1994, p. 11).

The Vishnu-Lakshmi images recall the Khmer myth recounted by Chou Ta-Kuan in yet another manner. In the myth, the king, the princess and the *naga* are the three main participants. The Kbal Spean reliefs feature Vishnu, Lakshmi and Ananta the snake. Thus the two sets of components fit elegantly into each other's persona. If we were to transpose the three actors from the myth onto the artistic representation, it would read thus: the snake and the goddess form a protective and fortifying bracket on either side of the god thus mimicking the roles of the princess and the *naga* in the Khmer myth. Visually, the *naga* and princess by their arrangement in the relief (tail-to-feet) seem to trace a continuity between the two forms, echoing their link to each other as in the myth. The connection between the *naga* and the earth is also underscored in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century Preah Ko inscription which states that the "Creator" strengthened the earth by reinforcing it with the coils of the king of serpents so that the earth will not buckle under the weight of the king's armies (Cœdès, 1937, p. 26). The snake is an ubiquitous feature in Khmer art as well as myth; it is the spirit of the land, it is the pivotal churn in the myth of the Churning of the Sea, the *naga* princess was the progenitor of the Khmer people through her union with Kaundinya the

brahmin, and the *naga* image is ever-present in nearly all monuments of the past and present. Therefore the *naga* is a multivalent symbol and an active agent that, at Kbal Spean could be understood as effecting the union of the male and the female.

Vishnu, Lakshmi and the *naga* are brought together through the interaction of natural elements. The landscape *enacts* what Tantra does for the adept. These disparate entities come together at this site, functioning as a *yantra* to guide the practitioner on his journey to his transformation. The Kbal Spean images are not overtly sexual or aggressive which distinguishes them from their Indian counterparts. Nevertheless, notions of sexuality and eroticism were likely expressed differently in different cultures. The goddess Lakshmi in this particular representation places her hand lovingly on the legs of her consort, much like the gesture of the queens towards the king in the image found at Bakong, referred to in Chapter 2. The imagery at Kbal Spean *is* sexual but articulated using subtle expressions. The gesture of loving intimacy could perhaps have had intense erotic overtones in the local culture at the time. I suggest that the Kbal Spean imagery presents notions of sexuality that maybe very different from what we understand. This underscores Urban's point that the practice of Tantra is culturally and historically specific and therefore would be characterized by a multiplicity of definitions.

## 5.11 Conclusion

We are left with one last question: Is the feminine in this context (Lakshmi) ultimately an independent entity of power and authority, or is she a vessel

through which the masculine achieves his goal? The answer is not very straightforward. In addition to her status as a Hindu deity, if Lakshmi also represented the princess in the Khmer myth (as I argue) then it would seem as though she was an indispensable and independent source of power and potency on which the king was dependent for survival. The prosperity of the material aspects of the kingdom (temples, palaces, rice-fields) was also dependent on the conjoint blessing of the male and female principles. On the other hand, these temples, palaces and so on were built by the kings who channeled the fecund power of Lakshmi (and Vishnu) at Kbal Spean then it would seem as though the feminine was a conduit through which the male gained access to power. As Jacobsen points out, there are references in inscriptions that the divine feminine, including Lakshmi, was also portrayed as dutiful and obedient to their husbands, in which case it would seem that her position at the feet of Vishnu may project her status in a different light. I suggest that the status of the divine feminine was a shifting one whose signification depended on the context within which she was represented. At Kbal Spean, Lakshmi's presence is critical, in light of its association with ancient ancestral beliefs, Tantric overtones and its role in creating the sacred geography.



## CHAPTER 6

### DURGA AT BANTEAY SREI

#### 6.1 Banteay Srei

Banteay Srei has earned high praise from scholars as the 'Jewel of Khmer Art' (Freeman and Jacques, 2006, p. 206). Its miniature size and the nearly three-dimensional bas-relief carvings covering the surface of the delicate pink sandstone monument set it apart from other Angkorian monuments (Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2). It is situated a little more than 12 miles (20 kilometers) north of



Figure 6.1: Banteay Srei, 967 C.E., Cambodia (Freeman and Jacques, 2006).

Angkor, almost at the foot of the Kulen Mountains. Its present name (translating to 'Citadel of Women') is a relatively recent one. The original name of the temple, designating the central *linga* was *Tribhuvanamaheshwara* which means 'Great Lord of the Threefold World' (Freeman and Jacques, 2006, p. 206). Other distinguishing features are several scenes from Hindu mythology portrayed



Figure 6.2: The elaborate carving on the temple walls of Banteay Srei.

with a dynamic flourish onto various pediments of the structure. The focus of this chapter are the Durga and Siva images carved on the West and East pediments of *gopura*. A deity that was a particularly favorite icon during the pre-Angkorean period, Durga is prominently featured in this Angkorean temple and with a wonderful dynamism, rarely encountered in her earlier portrayals. Durga Mahishasuramardini might also have been associated with an ancient cult involving human and animal (specifically buffalo) sacrifice. Therefore the depiction of the goddess poised to kill the *asura* at Banteay Srei strategically positioned over a doorway, would symbolically implicate those devotees entering or exiting the structure as potential sacrificial offerings. The vital and energetic depiction of this goddess at that specific position suggests that the image(ry) was meant to mark a locus for a transformative experience for the devotee. The other image depicted on the opposite pediment is that of a Dancing Siva. I suggest that these images are both individually significant as well as an interactive

whole. Further, their connection to the monument itself and the visiting devotee also needs to be studied in order to unpack the iconology of these images. Images are intimately connected with the built form, site and humans, all of which I argue are interconnected elements on the plane of Khmer history. In perceiving the images thus, the representation of the divine feminine not only steps beyond the peripheral identity accorded to her in earlier scholarship but it also suggests new ways of understanding gender roles in religious imagery itself. The juxtaposition of the Durga image with that of Siva and their perceived interaction is suggestive of a precariously balanced complementarity. This particular pair of images offer many fascinating leads into topics including Tantra, the relationship between sex/eroticism and violence and so on. Although this present study will briefly touch on those topics it is beyond the scope of this project to venture on an extensive study of all the possible leads and will form the subject of future research. Apart from the images themselves at this temple, references from inscriptions, local myths from Cambodia, Java, Bali and South India as well as current day performance traditions are among the sources used to construct the various arguments.

## 6.2 Banteay Srei: the monument

Banteay Srei was not built by a king<sup>1</sup>, but by Yajnavaraha, the *guru* or political and spiritual counselor of King Rajendravarman I and his successor Jayavar-

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<sup>1</sup>A verse in one of the inscriptions at the temple specifically stated that the temple should neither be taken or given away by kings or “their favorites” and that its status was predetermined by the founders. Those who tried to “change the destination of this good deed” would suffer untold horrors for ages in the many hells of Avici (Cœdès, 1937, p.155).

man V, and his brother Vishnukumara. Known as one of the “mightiest men in the kingdom” (Giteau, 1976, p. 107), Yajnavaraha was also a descendant of two kings Harshavarman and Indravarman and, according to the Banteay Srei inscription, was highly respected in Cambodia and overseas for his knowledge of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and philosophy, music, languages, theology, astronomy and literature (Coedès, 1937, pp. 153–154). He was also the regent for the young king Jayavarman V and continued to exert his political authority even after the king occupied the throne. According to Freeman and Jacques (2006, p. 206), Banteay Srei was commissioned by both Yajnavaraha and his younger brother, finished a year before the death of king Rajendravarman and consecrated in 967 C.E. A *linga* named Tribhuvanamaheshwara was installed in the central sanctuary. Inscriptions engraved on the doorways also mention that another *linga* was placed in the southern sanctuary and an image of Vishnu in the northern sanctuary (<http://www.webcitation.org/5uhBcFLQA>).

The temple itself came to the attention of the French only in 1914 and its restoration work in 1936 by Henri Marchal was important for its first extensive use of the process of anastylosis<sup>2</sup>. Today, visitors flock to see this miniature temple adorned with vibrant reliefs sculpted onto lintels and pediments including Ravana shaking Mount Kailasa (Figure 6.3), Krishna killing the evil Kamsa (Figure 6.4), the fight of Valin and Sugriva (Figure 6.5) as well as the exquisite male and female deities sculpted into niches (Figure 6.6). A beautiful stone image of a seated Siva with his consort Parvati perched on his knee (very similar to the image of the god and goddess in the relief depicting Ravana shaking Mount

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<sup>2</sup>Anastylosis is a procedure by which a heavily ruined or collapsed structure is restored after careful measurements, study and piece by piece disassembly and careful re-assembly using the original material where possible <http://www.webcitation.org/5uhBhxIEi>.





Figure 6.3: Ravanaa shaking Mt. Kailasa, Banteay Srei.



Figure 6.4: Krishna killing Kamsa, Banteay Srei (Freeman and Jacques, 2006).



Figure 6.5: Battle between Vali and Sugriva, Banteay Srei (Freeman and Jacques, 2006).

Kailasa) was discovered at the site (Figure 6.7). Coedes suggests that this image might have been placed near Gopura I (west) where there existed a pedestal corresponding to the image. The South shrine contained a *linga* while an image of a standing Vishnu was placed in the North shrine. Correspondingly, the two libraries that face these two shrines feature Saivite and Vaishnavite mythological stories. It is the relationship between the Durga and Siva images, depicted on the two faces of the Eastern *gopura* that is the focus of this chapter.

### 6.3 Siva and Durga: images set in stone and in motion

The Dancing Siva is portrayed on the eastern face of the East *gopura*, which is the central structure one encounters when stepping into the second enclosure.





Figure 6.6: A niche figure at Banteay Srei.



Figure 6.7: Sculpture of Siva and Uma found at Banteay Srei (Giteau, 1965).



The deity is the main image (Figure 6.8) on this pediment, framed by whorls and prancing lions. Siva stands with his knees bent, legs splayed, feet planted firmly on the ground and his ten arms arranged on either side of him with fingers depicting various *mudra*. With a half-smile playing on his lips, he looks serene and calm. The kinetic quality of this scene is reflected in Siva's swinging sash and the raised arm of the musician on his lower left as though he is about to strike his drum. Sitting to Siva's right is the South Indian saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar<sup>3</sup>. With disheveled hair, protruding eyes, fangs and a wasted body, she looks up to her god in awe. Holding cymbals in her gaunt hands, she appears to provide musical accompaniment to the drummer seated to the left of the dancing god. The iconography of Siva's image including his posture shares similarities with that of his fierce female counterpart Durga featured on the western pediment on the same *gopura* (Figure 6.9).

Durga at Banteay Srei is portrayed in one of her most powerful depictions in Khmer art. She is shown almost in mid-step with her head tilted to one side, back arched and her eight arms spread out around her. With her knees bent and left leg raised as though in mid-movement, her foot is pressed down on the head of the buffalo, lying bound at her feet<sup>4</sup>. The human form of Mahisha (one of his arms is clearly visible) emerges from the upper part of the animal. The spear in

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<sup>3</sup>Karaikkal Ammaiyar is believed to have lived in South India around the 6<sup>th</sup> century and was a devout worshiper of Siva. Because of her piety her husband came to regard her as a goddess rather than his wife. She then beseeched Siva to take away her physical beauty so that she could worship him without distractions and watch him perform his cosmic dance. In visual representations, she is portrayed as an emaciated woman sometimes with fangs and protruding eyes, holding cymbals in her hands (Gupta, 1991, pp. 196–198; Orr, 2005, p. 13; <http://www.webcitation.org/5uhBjoRlc>).

<sup>4</sup>Glaize in his description of this relief says a serpent, mentioned as *naga pasa*, entwines the buffalo demon in its coils. See <http://www.webcitation.org/5uhBcFLQA>.



Figure 6.8: Dancing Siva on the eastern face of the East *gopura*, Banteay Srei.

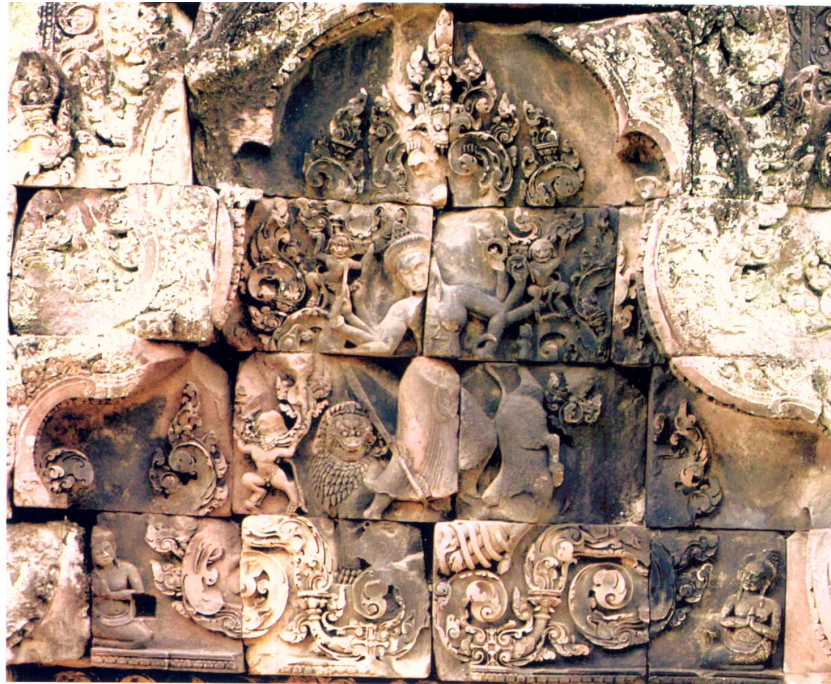


Figure 6.9: Durga as Mahishasuramardini on the western face of the East *gopura*, Banteay Srei (Roveda, 2005).

one of her right arms pins the helpless animal down. Her gently upturned lips belie the violence of her action. The goddess with her arched body and swaying skirt is framed by swirling whorls and prancing and grimacing lions as though they are enflamed by the energy radiating from the presence of Durga. These elements, including the lions, whorls and the undulating pediment frame, should be viewed as intrinsic elements to the entire composition and not as insignificant ornamentation. Rawson (1984, pp. 22–23) argues that even though we concentrate on the main figures and pay less attention to the ornamentation around them, it does not mean that the latter is unimportant. Such elements “establish the figures in relation to one another, and our eyes use such settings as a means to make a bridge from figure to figure”. The commonality of the lions, whorls and the frame help us to place the Siva and Durga representations in relation to one another as well as individual depictions. Further, these elements, pulsating with the energy radiating from the central figures, also add to and give visual expression to the dynamic quality of the representations. Durga, the ferocious consort of Siva was created out of the special energies of the gods who each provided her with their weapons to kill the undefeated demon king Mahisha. The moment of her majestic triumph of this goddess known as Mahishasuramardini (‘the one who killed the demon Mahisha’) over the buffalo-headed demon is one of the most popular visual depictions of this goddess, both in India and elsewhere. The Banteay Srei pediment is an exemplary representation of the precise moment of victory of the goddess over the demon. The popularity of Siva and Durga in Cambodia has a long history with visual evidence dating back to pre-Angkorean times.

## 6.4 Representations of Siva in the pre-Angkor and Angkor periods

Mus (1975, pp. 31–32) has suggested that the popularity of the Siva *linga* in Southeast Asia could in part be because the characterization of the Indian deity shared similarities with the local ancestral spirit that is believed to emerge from the earth in the form of an embedded stone. Later on, when *linga* were installed in temples bearing names of kings, both past and present, these *linga* were believed to be the embodiments of not only the ancestors but also the rulers. As Chandler (2000, p. 46) explains “Siva in this sense was a literary form of an ancestor spirit, held responsible for fertilizing the soil by inducing rain to fall on the region under his jurisdiction”. Until the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, nearly all Khmer temples were Hindu with a large number of them dedicated to Siva. In Khmer art, Siva is represented as: the dancer, the ascetic, as Umamaheshwara seated with his consort Uma (Parvati) on Nandi his vehicle, or in abstract form as the *linga* usually encircled by its female counterpart the *yonis*. Together they represented a symbol of fertility. This last appears to have been the most preferred representation among all. From the pre-Angkorean period, there is perhaps only one anthropomorphic image of Siva prior to the 9<sup>th</sup> century style of Preah Ko (Lavy, 2003, pp. 25–26). The only other anthropomorphic form that Siva is portrayed in is as the right half of Harihara, a popular image in pre-Angkorean Cambodia. Siva in human form began to appear in considerable numbers in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century C. E. There was a close link between Siva and Khmer kingship dating from the pre-Angkorean period which continued through the Angkorean age. Hermann Kulke (1978) has argued that the *devaraja* cult was likely a movable statue of Siva who as “god, who is king” protected the

Khmer kings (as “lords of the earth”). Kings consecrated *linga* in temples that sometimes bore their names.

During the Angkor period the dancing Siva was a popular representation on temple pediments but depicted in a more muted and “harmonious choreography” (Giteau, 1965, p. 14) than the south Indian Chola Nataraja. Siva is described as “the dance, cosmic, eternal, and timeless, moving in space and beyond the space and the spheres” (Vatsyayan, 1984, p. 192). In this representation, Siva is known as Nataraja and Natesa in different parts of India (both meaning ‘lord of the dance’) and in Cambodia, Nritteswara (also ‘lord of the dance’). The dance of Siva is known in India as the *tandava*. In Cambodia the dancing Siva was represented on the pediments of many monuments including Phimai (Figure 6.10) along with Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Phnom Rung (Figure 6.11), Phnom Chisor where he appears to be playing the flute, Wat Baset, Angkor Wat, Beng Mealea, Preah Pithu, Bayon, Banteay Samre (Figure 6.12), Preah Khan and Narai Jaeng Waeng. He is usually portrayed with ten arms although there are some images with two and four arms. At times, the god is flanked by Vishnu and Brahma as in the image at Bayon. The image at Phimai depicts Siva dancing on a slightly raised plinth and framed by a doorway with *naga* pediments (Figure 6.10). Seated on either side of the dancing god are small figures who seem to be bound and kneeling and straining at their ropes. Roveda (2005, p. 163) suggests that this image might be depicting a sacrificial scene, possibly Tantric in nature. In Hindu mythology, Durga is one of the forms of *sakti* of Siva. Her history in ancient Cambodia is somewhat shrouded in mystery but visual sources and oral history in particular indicate that the goddess had a prominent presence in religion and art. As a starting point for the mythology of Durga, we begin first with Indian sources.





Figure 6.10: Dancing Siva, Phimai, 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century, Thailand (Roveda, 2005).



Figure 6.11: Multi-armed dancing Siva, Phnom Rung, 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thailand (Roveda, 2005).



Figure 6.12: Dancing Siva on a lintel at Banteay Samre, first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

## 6.5 Durga's story

B.C. Mazumdar (1906, p. 355) states that there is no mention of Durga in Indian literature at least until the 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E. However, visual representations of Durga or Durga-like goddesses may have preceded her appearance in literary sources. The Metropolitan Museum of Art contains a plaque with an image identified as a proto-Durga and dated to the first century B.C.E. She is flanked by one male and three female worshipers, while various weapons peek out from her elaborate headdress. She is described as a tribal goddess associated with fertility<sup>5</sup> and war (Figure 6.13). The Bombay edition of the Mahabharatha Samhita contains two chapters which includes prayers to the goddess Durga (Mazumdar, 1906, p. 355). In it is also mentioned that Durga is the daughter of Yasoda

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<sup>5</sup>For the association between Durga, fertility, disease and protection of children see Santiko (1997) and references within.

and Nanda the parents of Krishna, inhabits the Vindhya mountains and is called Vindhyavasini or “she who dwells in the Vindhyas”. She is dark-complexioned, with four heads and four arms and is a virgin who “sways the worlds by remaining a maiden for ever” and is thus different from the Durga of the Puranas who is not dark and has ten arms (Mazumdar, 1906, pp. 356–357). Durga is identified as the one who kills the demon Mahishasura and that as Kali, she is fond of wine, flesh and animals, which gestures to a Tantric element in her myth. The writings of Banabhatta (the scholar and poet in Harshavardhana’s court) dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century mentions that “non-Aryans” worshiped horrible goddesses in the Vindhya region through offerings of blood and wine (Mazumdar, 1906, p. 357). Being a maiden, this goddess is not identified as Siva’s wife but is compared to Padma, the wife of Vishnu. Mazumdar (1906, p. 358) also suggests that Durga could have been a tribal goddess whose non-Sanskritic name could have been Durga or something similar, and that it is unclear whether Durga began as an independent goddess and then combined with Vindhyavasini or whether the latter evolved into Durga in the fusing of various tribes.

The Markandeya Purana (Pargiter, 1904) relates that after a hundred years of war between the gods and the *asura* or demons, the army of the *asura* defeated the gods who were driven out of their heavenly kingdom. The distraught gods went to Siva and Vishnu and pleaded for their help. The Markandeya Purana describes the subsequent events leading to the creation of Durga.

Having thus heard the words of the gods, Vishnu was wroth and Siva *also*; both their faces became furrowed with frowns. Then issued forth great energy from the mouth of Vishnu who was full of intense anger, *and from the mouths* of Brahma and Siva; and from the





Figure 6.13: Proto-Durga, presently located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <http://www.webcitation.org/5uhBnTtmz>

bodies of Indra and the other gods went forth a very great energy; and it *all* amalgamated. The gods beheld the mass of intense energy there like a burning mountain, pervading the other regions of the sky with its blaze; and that unparalleled energy born of the bodies of all the gods, which pervaded the three worlds with its light, gathering into one became a female. By what was Siva's energy her face was developed, and by Yama's *energy* grew her hair, and her arms by Vishnu's energy, by the Moon's her twin breasts; and her waist came into being by Indra's *energy*, and by Varuna's her legs and thighs, by the Earth's energy her hips, by Brahma's energy her feet, her toes by the Sun's energy, and by Vasus' *energy* her hands and fingers, and by Kuvera's her nose; and her teeth grew by the Praja-pati's energy, and her three eyes were developed by Agni's energy; and her eyebrows were the energy of the two twilights, and her ears Vayu's *energy*; and the coming into being of the energies of the other gods *became* the auspicious *goddess*.

Pargiter 1904, pp. 473–474.

After this dramatic creation, the gods felt greatly uplifted and gave her their own weapons and bowed before her, exclaiming "Conquer thou!". Durga roared and the earth and seas trembled with the echoes. Then the goddess fought with the *asura* and killed them in the hundreds and brought on their total destruction. Then she confronted Mahisha who tried to escape her blows by changing his form into various animals such as a lion, elephant and buffalo. Drinking mead, her eyes ruddy and laughing at her adversary, Durga advanced on Mahisha. She leapt onto him and kicked his neck with her foot. Sitting on him, she cut off his head with her sword and thus ended the battle

between Durga and Mahisha. The gods gathered around and prostrated before her, praising her valor and power, who lies beyond the comprehension of all gods. This fierce goddess was a popular subject for visual representations in India, both in the north and south with some differences in their representations.

### 6.5.1 Some examples of visual representation of Durga in India

Hariani Santiko (1997, p. 220) mentions that sectarian differences dictate the status of Durga Mahishasuramardini in the Hindu pantheon. For example, in Sakti worship, Durga is known as Mahasakti or Mahadevi and is typically accorded a superior position to Siva and is given a special temple known as *sak-tapida*. To Saivites who primarily worship Siva and also venerate Durga, she is identified as Siva's wife and her icon occupies the niche on the northern wall of a Siva temple<sup>6</sup>.

According to Agrawala (1958, pp. 129–130), northern Indian representations do not depict the demon as a buffalo-faced human but always as animal<sup>7</sup>. Images of Durga have been found in South India that date to the Pallava and Chola periods. The 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Mahabalipuram relief is a spectacular narrative representation, depicting the goddess majestically seated on a lion about to kill the buffalo-headed demon (Figure 6.14). Chandler points out that this was also the time when 'Indianization' was most intense in Southeast Asia, and therefore it is hardly surprising that numerous images of Durga were created in early Ja-

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<sup>6</sup>Using this as the standard, Santiko (1997, p. 220) suggests that since no temple was exclusively dedicated to Durga and that her statues were found in the cella north of the Siva temple, Sakti worship may never have developed in Java.

<sup>7</sup>See Figure A.7.

vanese art<sup>8</sup>. Chandler (1996, pp. 122–123) quotes P. Potts that the Mahishasuramardini representation is the form *par excellence* in Java. In many South Indian temples, she is most often featured as an independent deity, many-armed, holding the attributes of the gods including the discus, spear, trident, sword and shield. The lion is sometimes her seat, standing to her side or sometimes not depicted at all. Similarly, the buffalo is at times depicted as hapless victim or as her pedestal<sup>9</sup>. In many Chola temples she is featured as one of the niche figures on the northern wall of the main sanctuary. Durga in her representation as Mahishasuramardini (or versions of this role) was particularly popular in many parts of Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Java and Bali.



Figure 6.14: Representation of Durga Mahishasuramardini, 7<sup>th</sup> century, Mahabalipuram, South India.

<sup>8</sup>Chandler (1996, p. 122) and Santiko (1997, p. 210).

<sup>9</sup>For select examples of South Indian representations, see Figures A.8, A.9 and A.10.

## 6.6 Durga Mahishasuramardini in Java and Bali

Indonesian Hindu and Buddhist art flourished between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, with numerous temples known as *candi* being built during this time (Iyer, 1998, p. 10). Iyer notes that the *candi* of ancient Java are broadly categorized as Central and East Javanese based on their age and iconographic details. East Javanese (middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century) Durga images are slender, beautiful with smiling faces while those from the Majapahit period (13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century) are menacing with protruding eyes, long, canine teeth and a grimacing face and who is both feared and worshipped in contemporary Java (Santiko, 1997, pp. 210–211), (Brakel, 1997, p. 254). Unlike her Indian counterparts, the East Javanese Durga usually caresses or touches the demon's head who greets her with folded hands and with a smile (Santiko, 1997, p. 212). Additionally, the lion is also absent. According to Brakel (1997, pp. 254–255), the myth of Durga killing the demon Mahisha has not been found in either oral or written form in Javanese literature indicating that this myth was probably not known or even that the above imagery may not have depicted Durga at all but simply a protective goddess. Santiko suggests, however, that the depiction of Durga as the killer of Mahishasura was most popular; kings like Erlangga and Kertanagara seemed to have associated political victories with the worship of forms of Durga (Santiko, 1997, p. 216). Iyer (1998, p. 10) notes that *candi* Siwa in the Prambanan temple complex is also known as *candi* Loro Jonggrang, named after a local princess who is also identified with Durga Mahishasuramardini. An image of the goddess depicting her as the killer of the demon is enshrined in the north-facing chamber (Figure 6.15). According the local belief, the princess Loro Jonggrang was cursed to become a statue by the prince Bandung Bon-

dowoso who was tricked by the princess to avoid getting married to him. He then cursed her to become a statue. To the present day, local believe that the princess and Durga Mahishasuramardini are one and the same although the antiquity of this belief is unknown. Brakel (1997, p. 260) also mentions that the sacred woods Krendhawahana in Java where there is a place dedicated to the worship of Durga which seems to have been associated up until the colonial period, with people who wanted to make their weapons powerful. This association recalls the Mahishasuramardini myth in a very direct manner; therefore even if references to the myth may not exist in written form, echoes of it seem to exist in the local imaginary. Based on iconographic details, Brakel also suggests that this worship may have included Tantric elements as well, although little can be actually corroborated through literary evidence. Current ritual practices involving offerings of meat and references to magic associated with the worship of Sang Hyang Bathari Durga<sup>10</sup> is also suggestive of Tantric associations with this goddess.

According to Santiko (1997, p. 222) the different versions of Durga might correspond to the differing cultural environments in which this deity was popular(ized): Durga as a Saivite goddess was popular in court circles while Durga as a demoness existed beyond the limits of the court, which permitted transformations in her role and identity. The change from a goddess who helped her human worshippers to one who became a demonic deity, Santiko suggests, is the result of a corruption or “misunderstanding” of Tantric practices whereby the deity was associated with graveyards and terrorizing people. Brakel’s article (1997) mentions that Durga was regarded as a ruler of the local spirits in Java which is suggestive of the transformation of this deity to integrate into the local

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<sup>10</sup>See (Brakel, 1997, p. 261).





Figure 6.15: Image of Loro Jongrangg/Mahishasuramardini, Prambanan, 9<sup>th</sup> century <http://www.webcitation.org/5uhvSyyW8>.

cultural milieu. Brakel (1997, pp. 263–265) suggests that certain rituals associated with Durga also contain elements of exorcism pertaining to mishaps and unlucky birth, and also in relation to important events in one's life. In Brakel's analysis, Durga represents "the process of separation of body and soul: the disintegrating corpse, the unreceptive female, the sperm that is wasted" and is based on the origin of Durga as explained through shadow-puppet play *Murwakala*<sup>11</sup>. According to the myth, Bathara Guru (the supreme Javanese deity) created his consort Dewi Uma, the thirty gods with their spouses and separated the earth from sky. He then wanted to have sexual intercourse with Uma (literally "investigates his own creation of male and female") but his sperm drops without being received. Brakel (1997, p. 256) quotes from the shadow puppet-play *Murwakala*: "Hyang Pramesthi (Bathara Guru) is angry with his wife Dewi Uma, and this is why Bathara Durga is associated with Kala (the man-eating dragon)". Nevertheless, people appeal to her to satisfy their frustrated desires often at the expense of others' lives and well-being. The king offers her all varieties of food including wedding offerings to satisfy her hunger and to avert danger to his people.

In Bali, Durga or Betari Durga as she is known, is identified as the wife of Siwa (Siva) and is associated with death and destruction (Brinkgreve, 1997, p. 228). She controls *buta* and *kala*, the "demonic servitors of the gods" as well as the *leyak* who are witches who create diseases (Brinkgreve, 1997, p. 241). In the *Purwa Bhumi Kamulan*, a text pertaining to the creation of the world, Durga is described as a wrathful inner self of Uma<sup>12</sup>. She is also linked to the fearsome witch Rangda, whose story is a popular theatrical theme in Bali. Betari

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<sup>11</sup>(Brakel, 1997, p. 278).

<sup>12</sup>See the translation of the passage in Brinkgreve (1997, p. 242).



Durga is also represented as Durga Mahishasuramardini where she is a protector of the gods and destroys evil. Her multiple characteristics form the content of many hymns where she is praised as someone who has both “terrible and benevolent natures”, “bringing death and life”, and who is “embodied in all the gods” (Brinkgreve, 1997, pp. 243–244). According to Brinkgreve, in some parts of Bali, the offerings made to Betari Durga and Ibu Pretiwi, who is connected with germinating life and fertility (conceptually opposite to Betari Durga) as well as the nature of their respective sacred spaces (ancestral shrines and temples for Pretiwi and temples near graveyards and cremation grounds for Betari Durga) suggest that these two goddesses are conceptually related. Brinkgreve (1997, pp. 248–249) also suggests that Betari Durga as the Great Goddess, an independent and all-powerful deity, encompasses the role of Pretiwi. Durga, or localized Durga-like goddesses personified both beneficial as well as dangerous even Tantric aspects that could be viewed as contradictory to each other but in either case emphasizes her powerful status. It appears that certain local myths associated with Durga like that of Loro Jonggrang suggests that the deity exhibited independent power and potency. In Cambodia, images of Durga appeared from about the 7<sup>th</sup> until at least the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In these representations, the beauty and grace of this deity disguised some of her violent and aggressive traits and thus diverging not only from Indian but also some Javanese and Balinese portrayals.

## **6.7 The genealogy of Durga in Cambodia**

Kamaleswar Bhattacharya (1961, p. 92) rightly observes that although pre-Angkorean inscriptions do not seem to mention Durga, it is in this epoch that

one finds the best statues of the goddess. These free-standing sculptures of Durga suggest that perhaps she was worshiped as a separate entity in temples. In many of the pre-Angkorean images of the goddess, she is depicted as wearing a diadem, four-armed and standing on the head of a buffalo. According to Bhattacharya (1961, p. 92), there are hardly any statues of Durga Mahishasuramardini from the Angkor period although there are several references to this goddess in the inscriptions. This statement contradicts Jacobsen's (2008, p. 51) accurate observation that there are perhaps not more than two references in inscriptions to Durga Maishasuramardini between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Bakhong stele dated 881 C.E. mentions that the king Indravarman ordered or designed an idol of Mahishasuramardini at the temple and it was consecrated by all the women of the palace together (Coëdès, 1937, p. 32). This gesture by the king and his queens could perhaps be interpreted as a joint act of creating a sacred entity by the king and the women of the palace: while the king was responsible giving form to the entity, the goddess was brought to life by the king's collective *sakti* at the temple. Of the five images that were dedicated at the time to the temple, this was the only one specifically mentioned as designed by the king perhaps meaning to underscore the connection between political power and this goddess.

The free-standing sculptures depict Durga as calm and rather inert. The only indication of the violence associated with her is the head of the buffalo, her hapless victim, which forms her footstool. An exception to this pattern is the pre-Angkorean 7<sup>th</sup> century Durga image from Sambor Prei Kuk (Figure 6.16) where the goddess is portrayed with great sensuality and suppleness, one leg slightly bent and swaying skirts, as though caught in mid-movement. The damaged state of this statue does not detract from the beauty and vitality with which the



Figure 6.16: Durga Mahishasuramardini, first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Sambor Prei Kuk, Cambodia (Jessup, 2004).

artist chose to portray her. An unusual image of Mahishasuramardini from the second quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century depicts the goddess with eight arms, carved in relief (unlike the earlier free-standing images) with a lion and buffalo depicted below her feet (Figure 6.17). The remains of the trident on top of the buffalo's head indicates that the image was meant to represent the goddess in the act of killing the demon. With her eight arms spread around her and the frontal depiction of her lion, there is a resemblance between this image and the Banteay Srei relief. Some of the bas-reliefs in which she is represented during the Angkor period have a much more energetic quality to them, depicting the goddess engaged in the act of killing the demon, for example in the two nearly identical bas reliefs at Banteay Samre and Bakhong<sup>13</sup>. At Beng Mealea, the four-armed goddess stands on the head of the buffalo, much like the pre-Angkorean representations. At Banteay Srei, the eight-armed goddess holds the tail of the buffalo-demon, a feature which is found in another representation of the goddess of the Angkor period (Bhattacharya, 1961, p. 92). The link between the multi-armed goddess and the buffalo may have represented more than the Indian myth in Cambodia; it may have also denoted human and animal sacrifice although the antiquity of this ritual is hard to determine.

### 6.7.1 Me Sa and Mahishasuramardini

David Chandler (1996) wrote that there are many common elements between Durga Mahishasuramardini and a type of guardian spirit known in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as *me sa* which means 'white mother'. A Cambodian text composed in 1944 and printed in 1971 focuses on the *neak ta* or ancestor/guardian spirit cult in the

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<sup>13</sup>See Figures A.12 and A.11.



Figure 6.17: Durga Mahishasuramardini, second quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia (Bunker and Latchford, 2004).

country. The section on Me Sa is related by Dok Than, an elderly resident of Ba Phnom. The mountain at Ba Phnom is a place of much antiquity, with the earliest inscription from the site dating back to 692 C.E. (Chandler, 1996, p. 124). A 10<sup>th</sup> century inscription refers to Ba Phnom as the 'holy mountain' (Chandler, 1996, *ibid*). Dok Than's account begins by a description of a small 'Chinese style' temple containing several broken statues of Hindu gods including one of a goddess identified by the resident as 'Me Sa'. The statue is described thus:

'...an upright human female, approximately sixty centimeters tall, with her hair tucked inside a diadem. The face is well-rounded, even plump; the breasts are globular and firm. The image [once had] four arms. The lower arm on the right...bears a rectangular object...The upraised arm bears a wheel, while the lower one catches hold of the tail of [an animal that resembles] a tiger or a lion. The female presses against this animal with her feet...[as if to] lift it up...and has a boastful expression.'

Chandler 1996, p. 121.

Although no photographs of this deity exists, Eveline Poree-Maspero who visited this site in 1941 stated that this image was indeed one of Mahishasuramardini killing the buffalo-demon<sup>14</sup>. Porée-Maspero (1962, pp. 8–9) also asserts that the 'Me Sa' is a corrupted version of Mahishasuramardini.

Me Sa is also a generic term for guardian spirits which seem to be associated with particular sites; the term is mentioned in two texts describing a purification ceremony which was held in 1859 by King Ang Duang, and an oath known

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<sup>14</sup>Porée-Maspero (1962, p. 8). Chandler mentions that Etienne Aymonier's description of this image in 1880 also matches the description in the Cambodian text.



as *Pranidhan* used in Khmer civil trials (Chandler, 1996, p. 124–125). Chandler mentions that both texts contains lists of *me sa* with the *me sa* of Udong occupying the top spot in the 1859 text with no mention of that of Ba Phnom. On the other hand, the *Pranidhan* begins its list with the *me sa* of Ba Phnom allotting the second spot to the guardian spirit of Udong. Chandler suggests that human sacrifices were part of the cult of the Me Sa, thereby sharing a common trait with a possible South Indian cult involving head-offerings. Dok Than, the resident of Ba Phnom also mentions that men or animals were killed on the northern slopes of the mountains and offered to the *neak ta* on a Saturday in the months of May and June.

### 6.7.2 Me Sa, Mahishasuramardini and human sacrifices

Chandler (1996, p. 120) points to a reference in a speech by the Cambodian commander Prince Sisowath at the end of a military campaign in 1877 where the prince mentions two soldiers who were “offered up in the province of Ba Phnom”. Chandler (1996, *ibid*) suggests that the men were beheaded sometime in April or May of the same year as part of a royally sponsored ceremony known as *loen nak ta* which translates to “raising up the ancestors”. This ceremony honored the new agricultural year and Me Sa, the local ancestral spirit. Importantly, the phrase *me sa* used in the aforementioned two texts, translated to the ‘guardian spirit of Udong’ less than twenty years before the sacrifices of the two soldiers of 1877. Another factor strengthening the link between mountains, human sacrifice and royal patronage is the reference to an image of Mahishasuramardini in a 12<sup>th</sup> century inscription from Wat Phu in Laos. This ancient site is one of the most revered locations for the Khmers and was the locus of a

cult honoring the god Siva. A Chinese visitor from around 600 C.E. wrote:

On the summit of the hill there is a temple, guarded at all times by a thousand soldiers. This is dedicated to [Siva] and human beings are sacrificed there. Each year the king goes to the temple and makes a human sacrifice at night.

Chandler 1996, p. 126.

Buffalo-sacrifice or some form of offering to goddesses that included buffalo meat seems to have existed in other parts of Southeast Asia such as Laos and Java<sup>15</sup>. Brakel observed an ancient ritual where a sacrifice called *sesaji maesa lawung*<sup>16</sup> meaning 'offering of buffalo and lance' was offered to the goddess Durga by the royal court of Surakarta in Java. Buffalo meat and blood were included among the offerings made to the deity. Brakel points out that the Javanese manuscripts specifically state that the sacrifice must contain all sorts of living creatures and other ingredients. Therefore she stresses that the importance of buffalo should not be exaggerated, more so because the head of the buffalo was not part of the sacrifice. However, buffalo sacrifice seems to have been a part of the same ritual when it was performed in the past where a butcher slaughtered a buffalo, and its cooked meat, along with other meats, fruits, flowers and wine was offered as a communal meal to those who were present (Brakel, 1997, pp. 261–262). A similar ritual was apparently followed in Yogyakarta but there was no (sacrificial) buffalo involved in it. Incidentally, one of the inscriptions at Banteay Srei mentions a donation of two buffaloes made to

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<sup>15</sup>See Archaimbault (1956) on buffalo sacrifice in Laos.

<sup>16</sup>Despite the similarity between the word *maesa* and Mahisha, Brakel (1997, p. 257) points out that there are no references to the myth itself either in oral traditions or written records.



the god Tribhuvanamaheshwara “for the service of the cult” (Finot et al., 2000, p. 77). Could this be a reference to a ritual/cult that involved sacrificing buffaloes? Unfortunately the cryptic inscription provides no other details.

The association between Me Sa and human sacrifices share similarities with a South Indian ritual which included beheadings as ritual offerings to a goddess<sup>17</sup> J.Ph. Vogel (1931) refers to several images in Pallava and Chola temples which depict a man kneeling to the right of a four-armed Durga, in the act of cutting off his own head<sup>18</sup>. Tartakov and Vidya (1984, p. 339) remark that there may have been two related but different traditions associated with the goddess: the Durga Mahishasuramardini and a more localized Tamil tradition surrounding the goddess Korravai who came to be associated with the former in the *Silappadigaram*, the earliest surviving literature from the Tamil region. This local goddess may have had a closer association with self-mutilation than Durga did. The *Devi Mahatmya* talks in length about origin of Durga as the chief of all beings and her fight with Mahishasura but mentions only in passing about self-mutilation whereas the *Silappadigaram* refers to Korravai as the patron of hunters and only obliquely to the killing of the buffalo (Tartakov and Vidya, 1984, p. 340). The text dwells on various sacrifices offered to the goddess including head-sacrifices like the ones that are seen in the Pallava and Chola images; the book asks the goddess to “Accept the blood that flows from our severed young heads, the price of a victory you granted to the powerful and valiant Eiyannars” and also describes the goddess standing on the head of a buffalo, a reference that is omitted in the *Devi Mahatmya*. Tartakov and Vidya (1984, p. 340) suggest that the two traditions may be drawn from related pool of tradition rather than from one another.

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<sup>17</sup>For an account of various human and animal sacrifice rituals of South India, see Thurston (1912, pp. 199–223) and references therein.

<sup>18</sup>See Figures A.13, A.14, A.15, A.10 and A.9.

Vogel (1931, pp. 541–543) mentions that head offerings were also referred to in the *Kathasaritsagara* a compilation of folk stories written by Somadeva in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Kashmir, and also in the *Hitopadesa* another collection of fables dated to around the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In the stories that Vogel refers to the motives for the sacrifice are religious fervor and requesting a boon of longevity for another from the deities. Interestingly, as Vogel also points out, in both the stories and the visual representations, the head offerings are all made to goddesses. Records from the colonial period such as the one by Thurston (1912, p. 214) also contain descriptions about human sacrifices offered to “village deities” like Mariamma, Durga and Bhadrakali, which once included beheadings. Some of the rituals also included the sacrifice of animals like chicken, goat and buffalo. Chandler remarked that at one time, beheading was a common ritualistic practice in many cultures. Chandler notes that the unique feature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sacrifices is that they took place when Theravada Buddhism was the dominant faith in Cambodia. He speculates that this might be the result of a royal association with the mountain which was carried out in the person of *sdach tran* who were the people linking the king’s ceremonial powers with the surrounding domains of Cambodia. He points out that only three sites were associated with beheadings during the 19<sup>th</sup> century which included Ba Phnom, Thbounng Khmum and Kompong Svai, each of which was the seat of power of one of five *sdach tran*. Another reason for the continued practice of human sacrifices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was that there may have been a coexistence of Indian religions along with Theravada Buddhism even after the state had become predominantly Buddhist. By suggesting that the practice of human sacrifices was a feature of Indian Hinduism (Chandler, 1996, pp. 127–129), Chandler appears to contradict his earlier statement regarding the universality of the practice.

The association of Durga/local deity with animal/buffalo/human sacrifice and mountains in various parts of Southeast Asia and other cultures is strongly suggestive of a cult that may well have had ancient roots. There is no question that the deity (or deities if one were to think of the goddess as a conglomeration of many deities) was considered powerful and dangerous to whom substantial sacrifices were offered. At this point, however, we are left with more questions than answers. Did Durga as Mahishasuramardini share similarities with a local deity to whom human and animal sacrifices were offered? Or were they two different traditions, one being court-based and derived from India, and the other originating from a common Southeast Asian cultural repertoire as Santiko has suggested for Java? Jacobsen (2008) points to the possible identification of a queen with an image of Durga Mahishasuramardini, as a commemorative act after the queen's death. Jacobsen (2008, pp. 50–51) explains that many royal women of the Angkor period were posthumously given the title of *kanlong kamraten an* and were referred to by place and not name, indicating the relationship between women and land. One popular funerary cult refers to the focus of veneration as 'kanlong kamraten an Anve Tonle' ('queen of the lake of Anve') and was especially associated with the reign of Rajendravarman II and his son Jayavarman which was also the period when Banteay Srei was constructed and consecrated. The inscription implies that the funerary cult had been in existence for some time<sup>19</sup>. Several donations were made to the *kanlong* and in 979 C.E. 'a Bhagavati Mahishasura was erected there in the image of the *kanlong kamraten an Anve Tonle*'. Jacobsen (2008, p. 51) asserts that it "cannot be a coincidence that this powerful queen was immortalised in the tradition of early Cambodian autonomous goddesses". Donations to this *kanlong* appears to have continued

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<sup>19</sup>Incidentally, the Durga image at Banteay Srei faces west, sometimes identified as the direction of death.

at least until the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. It is tempting to think that the goddess Durga also represented a potent autochthonous feminine force identified with royal women. This association gains credibility given the importance accorded to matriliney in ancient Cambodia. Therefore it is possible that Durga was a composite being, a fusion of Indian and local sacred powers.

Other questions remain. For instance, could the meat and human offerings be traced back to Tantric or autochthonous roots, and was there a conflation of the two? In Java, the animal meat offerings were distributed to those assembled for the ritual for reasons including political potency. In Cambodia, humans seem to have been offered to the goddess, at least some of the time, to appeal for protection of the kingdom. What exactly was the nature of the sacrifice? Paul Mus (1975, pp. 12–13) in his essay on indigenous cultures of Champa suggested that in a human or animal sacrifice, the victim is not served *to* the god, as the deity is not meant to be a cannibal. Instead, the victim becomes a temporary vehicle for the god and through this vehicle, the “impalpable assumes a body and becomes accessible” and to whom oaths, salutations, and perhaps, requests were made. Mus’s suggestion allows us to re-position the relationship between the deity and sacrifice where the offerings (human soldiers in the case of Cambodia) could actually transform into embodiments of the deity itself (goddess/Durga). This process of transformation involves a substantial remaking of the subject; using Mus’s perspective, it is possible to perceive an intermingling of deity and devotee, where the human soldiers at the sacrificial altar ritually transcend their original identities and become identifiable in the deity and vice versa. The two are separate and yet coalesced. Mus’s argument provides an effective lens with which to perceive the interconnections between various elements in a sacred landscape including the monument, images, humans and of

course, the landscape itself. For example, the building of the monument has been viewed as an enactment of a ritual by the king/patron to the gods and not merely the erection of a building. As Mabbett and Chandler (1995, p. 18) argues, Khmer monuments were actual sacramental creations where ideal forms in Hindu and Buddhist mythology were made real in the world. "... the temple at the centre of the kingdom really became the centre of the universe and the home of the gods; the king at the centre of the government realized his identity with the impersonal ideal king in heaven" (Mabbett and Chandler, 1995, *ibid*). As noted earlier by Chandler (2000, p. 46), the reenactment of lordliness of the king i.e., to demonstrate his superiority in battle, sexuality, poetry, ceremony etc. represented the king as a hero of an Indian epic. This kind of reenactment (described in inscriptions) was to present a god-like behavior so that blessings can be obtained for the king and kingdom. This was achieved through acts such as building temples, defeating his enemies etc. and therefore Chandler argues that the word "symbol" does not mean much in this context. The king believed in these rituals. "Ceremonies were the vehicles through which his lordliness - in which he also believed - was acted out" (Chandler, 2000, pp. 46–47).

One could extend this argument to say that not only the building of the temples but the choice of images, their respective locations and so on were also enactments of a permanent ritual through which the king ensured the welfare of his kingdom, and not just a symbol. In this perspective, this particular articulation of beliefs was different from Clifford Geertz's notion of Balinese politics and culture. He wrote that both in court and elsewhere the Balinese "cast their most comprehensive ideas of the way things ultimately are, and the way that men should therefore act, into immediately apprehended sensuous symbols—into a lexicon of carvings, flowers, dances, melodies, gestures, chants, ornaments, tem-

ples, postures, and masks—rather than into a discursively apprehended, ordered set of explicit “beliefs” (Geertz, 1980, p. 103). Geertz (1980, pp. 103–104) argues that these symbols and their use in the theater state were aimed at expressing a perspective of “the ultimate nature of reality” and by thus presenting them, to make that reality actually happen. Geertz’s argument assumes that there is a qualitative difference between the symbols and the reality that they are meant to represent. The characters involved in the dramatization (king, court, country) were meant to fashion themselves into “facsimiles of the order their imagery defined”<sup>20</sup>. A replica is of course, not of the same nature as the original; I argue that the temple and the images on them can perhaps could be viewed as being emanations of the divine and not merely replicas. If one were to argue for the permeable (and omnipresent) nature of the divine, then it would follow that the monument and images that embody the divine are examples of not the symbolism but the “realism” of its presence and power as its patrons perhaps believed. Images on the temples could therefore mean more than static illustrations, but rather a reenactment of the actual events/rituals themselves transforming the space into a site palpitating with sacred energy. Consequently, when the devotee visits the monuments and views the images, he/she is a witness to the events, and as I argue later, a participant as well. In this interconnected chain of devotee, image, monument and site we now trace one link in the network between the Durga and other bas-reliefs on the monument.

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<sup>20</sup>Geertz (1980, p. 130) also described the Balinese king as “a sort of human ideogram”, who seemingly gave up individual identity. The king was a sacred likeness of kingship itself. According to Geertz, the king was an actor in the court ceremonies whose function was to project a stationary axis of his kingdom but at the same time embody a “strenuous athleticism of the spirit”. He was a ritual object created by the cult of kingship and the drama of *negara*, the theater state.

## Balancing with feet

The Durga image shares a common feature with several other bas-relief images at Banteay Srei: the feet become one of the focal points of the scene. Consider these examples: Siva with his two feet planted firmly on the ground (Figure 6.18), Durga in the act of pressing down the buffalo with her foot, Siva steadying Mount Kailasa with his foot (brought even more into focus with two flanking figures pointing towards the god's foot) (Figure 6.3), Krishna bringing down his uplifted foot on Kamsa as he prepares to kill him (Figure 6.4), the *naga* with its tail anchored to the earth as well as Indra with an uplifted foot atop Airavata shown on the North library (E. pediment, Figure 6.19), Bhima using his leg/foot to tear asunder the body of Jarasandha and two representations of Sugriva pressing Valin (who also has his foot on the former) with his foot as Rama takes aim to kill the latter (Figure 6.5).



Figure 6.18: Siva with his feet planted on the ground, Banteay Srei.





Figure 6.19: Indra with uplifted foot and *naga* with its tail anchored to the earth, Banteay Srei.

Many of the scenes described above revolve around a common theme, that of terminating the element of danger, a danger that has the potential to upset an otherwise state of equilibrium. The foot becomes one of the main agents that enable the restoration of balance. Let us consider the circumstances that culminate in the scenes chosen to be portrayed on the monument: Mahisha in the form of a buffalo attempting to take over the world of the gods, Ravana trying to perturb Mount Kailasa and its various residents but chiefly Siva and Parvati, Kamsa's many attempts to end the life of Krishna, Jarasandha's endeavors to take over Mathura and challenge Krishna, and Valin taunting and then unjustly banishing his brother Sugriva from his kingdom. Durga was created to restore balance and justice to the world by annihilating the *asura* Mahisha. Siva's fit into this thematic template is harder to ascertain. Judging by the image of Karaikkal Ammaiyar seated to his right, one could argue that the Siva at Banteay Srei might have been a Khmer interpretation of the Siva Nataraja, an icon that gained pop-



ularity during the contemporaneous Chola period<sup>21</sup>. In many Chola tableau, Karaikkal Ammaiyar has a recurring presence, depicted as she is at Banteay Srei in emaciated form and with cymbals in her hands (Figure 6.20). Another



Figure 6.20: Karaikkal Ammaiyar seen directly below Siva's uplifted foot, Gangaikondacholapuram temple, 11<sup>th</sup> century.

common feature between the Banteay Srei Siva and a Chola Nataraja are the multiple arms. However, the latter typically has four arms with the rear arms holding objects such as a drum and a flame, and the front arms are held in "elephant hand" and open-palm gestures (Kaimal, 1999, p. 393) (Figure 6.21). By contrast, at Banteay Srei, Siva's hands appears to portray *mudra*. Chola Nataraja stand with their right leg deeply bent while the left leg is lifted to waist height and crosses the hips (Kaimal, 1999, *ibid*). More importantly, Chola images of Nataraja represent him trampling a dwarf under his planted foot, which ac-

<sup>21</sup>For a recent study on the evolution of the Siva Nataraja during the Chola period see Kaimal (1999).



Figure 6.21: Nataraja in bronze, 12<sup>th</sup> century, Serfoji Museum, Tanjavur.

cording to Ananda Coomaraswamy (cited in Kaimal, 1999, p. 394) symbolized Siva dispelling ignorance. The Banteay Srei ensemble does not include a dwarf. Therefore the differences between the Banteay Srei Siva and Nataraja are significant enough to warrant a warning that a comparison or analogy between the two remains precarious<sup>22</sup>. With his two feet securely and evenly planted on the ground, and strategically placed between other images which clearly depict a state of flux, could Siva then represent a state of equilibrium? That could be one likely interpretation. It could be suggested that perhaps Siva denoted the anchor that visually locks the monument in place, off-setting the surrounding more animated representations. The natural question to pose at this juncture is: what is the relevance of placing images of the Siva and Durga on pediments over the doorways at Banteay Srei, particularly with reference to the focus of the feet in both representations?

### 6.7.3 Passing through liminal spaces: images over doorways

Pediments, like lintels<sup>23</sup> can also be characterized as “boundary markers” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 5), separating the secular world (outside of the temple) from the divine (spaces inside the monument). Positioned between the two, they mark the liminal space between the two worlds. David Shulman in his

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<sup>22</sup>It should also be pointed out that Indian Saiva texts also claim that there is more than one form of the *tandava* dance (Iyer, 1998, p. 69).

<sup>23</sup>Polkinghorne (2007, pp. 5–6) notes that decorative lintels are occasionally appear on some Indian temples but not in the same manner as the independent blocks of stone that appear on Khmer temples. Medieval Javanese temples contain decorative arches containing images of *kala* and *makara*. While only Khmer-inspired temples in Thailand had lintels, they were not a notable feature on Cham monuments.

book *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* wrote that liminal spaces contain “hidden presences” that are transitory, imbued with power but also intimately connected with externalized forms associated with them<sup>24</sup>. In other words, the two maybe “distinguished but never fully divorced”, recalling the notion of permeable boundaries once again. As we pass under images sculpted on lintels, for a brief moment we are positioned under the feet of the deity and at that moment and in that space we become a part of the mythical event; we take the place of Mahisha as Durga pinned under her spear, and we become the platform on which Siva places both his feet as he performs his dance. Far from being “polluted” by their feet touching the feet, it requires a sense of great humility to place oneself at the feet of a deity, as Rawson (1973, p. 85) explained with relation to Vishnupada, much like the King Bali who offered his head to Vishnu<sup>25</sup>. The positioning of the devotee under Durga’s foot may have more than one meaning. If we assume that the ritual of human sacrifice associated with the local goddess/Durga existed in the Angkor period, then by placing oneself under her foot the devotee becomes the object of sacrifice, and (by Mus’s argument) deity herself. The devotee thus exists individually and becomes both the sacrificial offering and the deity. The doorways of Banteay Srei are narrow and small, and therefore the confined nature of the doorway appears to incorporate the devotee into the representation above. In this way, the devotee forms an intimate link with the monument and the image.

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<sup>24</sup>(Shulman, 1985, pp. 3–5).

<sup>25</sup>For the story of King Bali and Vishnu refer to page 140.

## 6.8 Siva and Durga images as an interactive whole

Let us now consider the significance of the Siva and Durga images as an interactive whole. For this we need to view the two images as two ends of a scale (as in the scales held by the blindfolded Lady of Justice) thus holding the two icons in a balance. The dynamic Durga and the relatively stable Siva do not project a state of equilibrium but a condition of unpredictable fluctuation between stasis and movement, ever-changing and flitting between one state and the other. Through this particular interaction the two seemingly isolable entities are brought into play with each other, doing away with any static hierarchical arrangement in which one occupies a predominant position and the other peripheral. Scholarship on Khmer culture, history and politics has largely centered around the activities of male political leaders and the importance of masculine religious imagery and by consequence the feminine has automatically been accorded an insignificant and marginal status. In such a perspective, the masculine and feminine presence have mostly been studied as discrete from each other<sup>26</sup> as well as hierarchized. At Banteay Srei, the goddess Durga poses a direct and categorical challenge to the status of passivity and inconsequence designated to the divine feminine in earlier scholarship. Contemporary performance traditions of Cambodia provide an additional tool to flesh out the interactive dynamic between these forms, particularly in light of the inter-relationship of the male and female principles in Khmer culture. No doubt this is a precarious approach, as there is no clear, connecting thread between contemporary dance and drama practices and those of the past, nor what they symbolized at different times. As mentioned earlier, Andaya (2006, p. 60) has pointed out the

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<sup>26</sup>As noted earlier, Phim (1994); Phim and Thompson (1999) and to an extent Cravath (2007) have been exceptions to this trend.

inability to lock down performance to a specific historical moment, implying a certain degree of unreliability compared to written texts; the only significant information that can be gleaned from performances are when shifts in choreography, deportment and dress. In other words, she implies that performance as a source is valid only at moments of change. Therefore why even consider this as a venue for research? McGowan (2008, p. 241) in her recent study of ritual Balinese deposit boxes has skillfully demonstrated that although it is “virtually impossible to make direct correlations between current deposit practices in Bali and discoveries from the distant past, it is useful to draw analogies, if only to shed possible light on underlying motivations”. To begin with, one must first address the issue of reliability of dance iconography as historical documentation of the past.

## **6.9 Performance practices as a historical source**

Alessandra Iyer (1998, p. 4) suggests that although dance choreography may not aid in reconstructing choreographic pieces of the ancient past, their reliability in relation to portrayal of movement techniques cannot be denied. She says that “It is likely that these (dance images) would have a basis in forms known to the artists and craftsmen through living performance practices” (Iyer, 1998, *ibid*). Importantly, Iyer (1998, [p .37]) also emphasizes that the dance images also has connections with the religious and social role of dance itself. However, some scholars seem reluctant to view dance iconography as a valid documentary source, for instance, its role in lending meaning to architecture. Andaya (2006, p. 61) claims that it is not often possible to reconstruct “mental links” between artistic representation and lived experience. For example, Cravath (2007,

p. 334) who has worked on dance and drama traditions of Cambodia points out that examples of similarities between bas-reliefs of Angkor and certain dance postures are rare. According to him, the bas-reliefs only contain a small number of dance postures and that there is no proof that these poses reflected actual performances during the time. However, in the context of dance images of the Prambanan temple in Java, Iyer (1998, p. 38) suggests that the artists might have been given specific guidelines on the design by those skilled in that particular dance style; this would imply that that specific dance style was part of the contemporary practice. Therefore it is more than possible that dance iconography is undeniably and inevitably tied to the contemporary forces that brought it into existence. According to Iyer (1998, p. 183), the reason for scholars querying the reliability of dance image as an accurate record of the past could be that it is considered too ephemeral, 'subjective' and therefore non-scientific and that its "narrative, devotional or symbolic function would automatically exclude a relationship with reality" . Acceptable sources such as the cryptic verses and panegyric poetry which constitute the bulk of the Khmer Sanskrit inscriptions are also ephemeral and laden with symbolism, and therefore no different from performance, dance imagery and myth. Information in other written sources like Chinese documents which were once accepted as factual evidence are now treated with necessary caution as consequence of its subjectivity like any literary source. Therefore if these sources are accepted as evidence indicating contemporary social and religious mores and principles of the time, then it is hard to understand why dance images would also not be reflective of past practice as well suffice to say that one needs to exercise the necessary caution with any source material.

### 6.9.1 Ritual function of dance in Cambodia

Images on artifacts, temples and references in inscriptions strongly suggest that dance was an important aspect of Khmer religious and cultural life<sup>27</sup>. Phim and Thompson (1999, pp. 1–2) mention that the progenitor of the Khmer people Mera, was a dancer, an *apsara*. The creation of the celestial dancer is portrayed in one of the most popular myths of Indian origin, the Churning of the Sea of Milk where the *deva* and *asura* churned the mountain Mandara to extract the elixir of immortality from the depths of the sea. Among the many treasure that emerged from the sea were thousands of dancing nymphs called *apsara*. As Cravath explains:

The myth is seminal to much of the temple and city architecture itself and objectifies the Khmer view of the interaction of earth and sky, matter and spirit, female and male, rice and rain - that is to say, the union of the Feminine and Masculine which engender all fertility, spiritual fulfillment, and life itself. The myth is sometimes known as the “Churning of the Sea”.

Cravath 1986, p. 185.

Cravath stresses that despite the Indian influence in other facets of Khmer culture, the foundations of Khmer dance so completely embodies the Khmer outlook in life and so could only have originated among the Khmers themselves (Cravath, 1986, p. 179).

An interesting feature of the Durga and Siva images at Banteay Srei is their affinity to dance. In the case of Siva, the connection to dance is apparent by

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<sup>27</sup>For a lengthier discussion on the role of dance in Khmer culture, see section 4.4.



the position of his legs, the *mudra* of his hands, and flanked by the drummer and Karaikkalammaiyyar sounding the cymbals in her hands. Durga is depicted in the act of killing the buffalo-demon, a representation that is not obviously related to dance. How does her representation at this monument justify an association with dance? With her swaying skirts, and her body arching backwards balanced by her flexed knees and hands there is an undeniable sense of coordinated movement in Durga's depiction<sup>28</sup>. Her back is arched, a feature that is present in dance postures of contemporary Cambodia (Figure 6.22). The tilt of the dancer's head continues along the line of curvature of the spine, just like the Durga at Banteay Srei. These features also set apart the Banteay Srei Durga from other bas-relief representations of the goddess, for example the ones at Bakong (Figure 6.23), Banteay Samre (Figure 6.23) and Sikhoraphum which present Durga in a more aggressive posture. Phim and Thompson point out that certain modern dances like the *Apsara* dance in many ways evoke the sculptures on Khmer temples like the images of *apsara* on Angkor Wat. The authors' description of the *apsara* dance movements is in some ways befitting of Durga's posture as well. According to them the dance evokes the association between the "...the tension between earthly groundedness and ethereal lightness evinced in a strong vertical pull, weight low and centered, balanced by movement across a horizontal plane. Sustained physical energy, visible in flexed fingers and toes and measured gestural progression, combines with fluid and seemingly effortless execution of posture and travel through space to convey at once a sense of solidity and of delicacy" (Phim and Thompson, 1999, pp. 35–36). Juxtaposed with each other, the Durga and Siva seem to take on the

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<sup>28</sup>Phim and Thompson (1999, p. 6) have also remarked on the similarity of images on Banteay Srei to contemporary dance postures. An example is the monkey combat scene, which incidentally also shows one of them putting its foot on the other.

characteristics of a pair of dancers partnering with each other<sup>29</sup>. As noted in the previous chapter, dance in Cambodia was and continues to be intimately connected with fertility, to the powers of the earth and invoking the blessings of ancestral spirits.



Figure 6.22: Cambodian classical dance performer (Cravath, 2007).

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<sup>29</sup> A 10<sup>th</sup> century image of a female divinity, possibly in a dance pose, was found next to the remains of a massive image thought to represent Siva dancing. Phim and Thompson (1999, p. 5) suggest that the female was most likely the consort of the dancing male. Therefore there might have been a precedent to a pairing of a dancing Siva and his consort also in a dance pose.

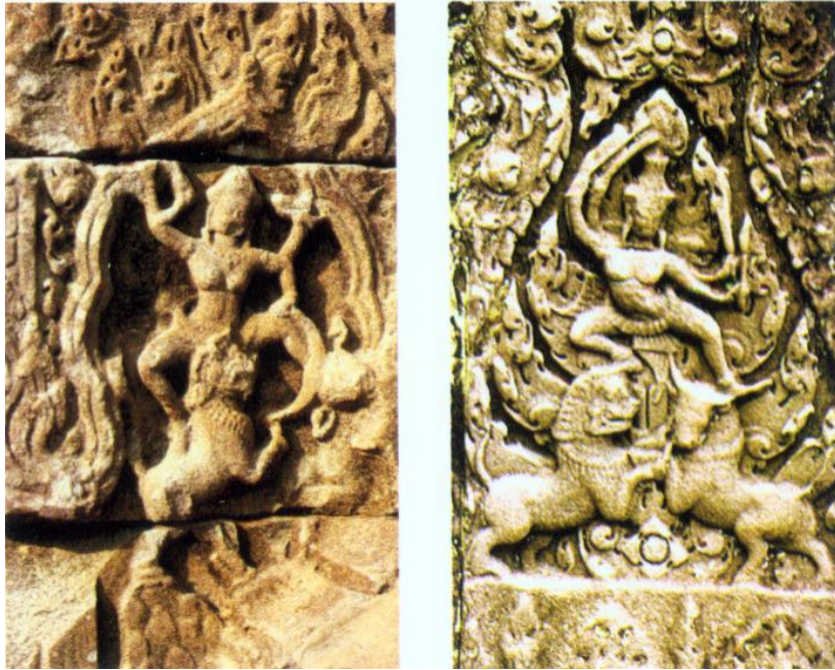


Figure 6.23: Durga Mahishasuramardini at Bakong and Banteay Samre (Roveda, 2005).

Cravath (2007, p. 38) points out that whether the primary forces were expressed as female and male, earth and water or light and dark, their interaction was conceived as “a contest or battle expressible in dance, which was the embodiment of their rhythms”. A hypnotic tempo, “a pervasive concern for the creative tension between male and female... and a concern for social and sexual harmony” are some of the characteristics associated with the spirit world and fertility rites (Cravath, 1986, p. 189), that might have translated to the dance and drama performances themselves. Would this imply that their interaction was one of perfect equilibrium? Cravath posits that the distinguishing feature of Angkorean art (including dance) is its “generative balance” between the feminine and the masculine<sup>30</sup>. One would have to pause here and inquire if the

<sup>30</sup>Cravath elaborates that the element of balance is present in the architectural elements of the monument itself, for example, the balustrade of *deva* and *asura* leading up to the gates of Angkor

interaction between the masculine and feminine elements are conceived as a state of stasis or one that is continuous and dynamic. If the former, then Cravath's notion of symmetry and balance would be the suitable illustration. If on the other hand, one were to perceive the interaction as a more dynamic activity, then, one is able to imagine the see-sawing of forces, now pulling to one side and then to the other much like the churning action. Durga and Siva would thus be defined by the actions that they would be engaged in and not solely by their stationary moment that has been captured on the monument. In this way, inherent gender hierarchies which would assign a fixed status ('central', 'peripheral' and so on) are constantly dismantled, put together, only to be dismantled again. Once again, like the images at Prasat Kravan and Kbal Spean the body becomes the "site for the emanation of the will to power... an intensely energetic locus for all cultural production" (Grosz, 1994, pp. 146–147). The "generative" energy between Durga and Siva is created through the reciprocative action of their physical presence and action. Therefore visual images like the Churning of the Sea of Milk and the various bas-reliefs of Banteay Srei, the Lakshmi and Vishnu images at Kbal Spean and other depictions on monuments could represent an on-going activity, a continual process and not just simply the culmination point or a frozen moment. A process that, like a *yantra*, is made present so that the devotee is aware through all of the senses the powerful forces that animate and inhabit sacred spaces. Therefore at Banteay Srei, the interaction between Siva

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Thom. According to Cravath's interpretation of the Churning of the Sea of Milk representation at Angkor Wat, the conflict between the *deva* and *asura* also represents the duality of forces, left and right, moon and sun, Masculine and Feminine, which is intrinsic to Khmer mythology. He explains: "Clearly both sides are necessary and equal. Their action is marked by symmetry and balance; they work together and symbolize the creative action of the central figure (king) upon the waters" (Cravath, 2007, pp. 38–39, 47–48).

and Durga could be perceived as one in which the two vital forces are perpetually engaged in the “generative” process itself. I suggest that the Durga at Banteay Srei is yet another example of the critical feminine force, that found expression in myths, inscriptions, through the goddess images at Prasat Kravan, Kbal Spean as well as in later day performance practices.

## 6.10 Durga and Siva: fusion of generative powers

Cravath (1986, p. 189) emphasizes that the repertoire, music, formal elements of the dance and the choreography do indicate an indigenous origin which is linked to fertility rites or the spirit world. Among the ways in which “life-power” from spirits and ancestors was received and proliferated in Cambodia was dance, sex and the use of stone *linga* or statue-portraits (Cravath, 2007, pp. 18–19). Ancestor worship and fertility cults have ancient roots in Cambodia, particularly the worship of tree, stone and serpent<sup>31</sup>, elements which are very much a part of the iconography of many Khmer temples, including Banteay Srei. Unlike most other temples, at Banteay Srei, the profusion and almost life-like depiction of plants and flowers depicted on the temple walls reach exuberant heights. Punctuating the flow of winding vines and plants stand figures of young men and women that have drawn praise for their extraordinary youthfulness and beauty of form (Figure 6.24). As Giteau (1965, p. 83) describes them, the niche figures are youthful and slim and in the cusp of maturity, bringing attention to their fertile youth. The various mythological scenes are also framed

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<sup>31</sup>Mus (1975); Aeusrivongse (1976); Choulean (1988, 1995) are some of the scholars who have worked on ancestor and spirit cults of ancient Southeast Asia.

within animated whorls of vines, creepers and sinuous snakes<sup>32</sup> Stella Kramrisch's quote on (images at thresholds and niches aptly sums up this lavish display of fecundity when she says images in which life is young and quick" that stand amidst creepers and serpents winding around doorways together "enclose the door ascending in an unbroken continuity of swaying creepers, superposed and in panels, each filled with a sinuous pattern of limbs rounded with the sap of youth; all these are sculptural metamorphoses and elaborations of the theme of the River-goddesses for it is from their waters that they rise". Furthermore, the transformation that the devotee is meant to undergo by entering the sacred presence inside the temple is "promoted by the divinities carved on the door-jambs" (Kramrisch, 1946, p.314).

The lush vegetal depictions intersected by the youthful human forms call to mind Andaya's (2006, pp. 62–63) comment regarding the link between landscape and eroticism in Southeast Asian courtly literature. She explains that

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<sup>32</sup>Bosch (1960, pp. 19–20) points out that the lotus scroll motif (*kalpalata*) is abundantly common not only in Indian but in Southeast Asian art as well. The winding plants and vines on Banteay Srei are examples of this motif. This particular design had remained relatively unobserved because it was viewed merely as a partition between narrative reliefs. According to Bosch's argument, the choice of the plant, the lotus, is no accident but plays a significant role in Hindu religious philosophy. The biological structure of the plant (a rhizome) without a central tap root but with its horizontal root-stock and nodes, and flowers and leaves rising directly from the rhizome is analogous to its use in art. Bosch (1960, pp. 235–237) argues that the lotus scroll functions not just as a frame for narratives but like a rhizome, is connected to and provides the *rasa* or life-giving essence to each character and object *in* those narratives. In other words, the animals, people and other objects are like the flowers and leaves of the rhizome. Bosch's argument beautifully illustrates the interconnectivity of all entities, with none relegated to the periphery or highlighted as the center, much like the plants, vines, gods, goddesses and animals featured on the walls of Banteay Srei.

“male desire for the female body is commonly conveyed through allusions linking landscape and plant life...Nature and female beauty are so closely linked in Javanese texts “that mere mention of an element of either in a line or stanza subtly conjures an image of the whole””. However, at Banteay Srei, it is *both* the female and male forms that sensuously evoke the supple, willowy contours of the plants. Were they meant to represent the male and female spirits of the soil, whose combined blessings were essential for the fertility of the soil and the prosperity of the kingdom<sup>33</sup>? It is a tempting consideration. The deities Siva and Durga also have links to the theme of fertility. As mentioned earlier, an image of Durga was erected in memory of a deceased queen while Siva was worshipped as the ancestral spirit. Chandler (2000, p.46) points out that Siva and his consort Uma “were gods to whom sacrifices—buffaloes or human beings—were addressed because they were thought of as divinizations of what lay under the earth”. At Banteay Srei, however, it is not Uma but Durga, the more dynamic *sakti* of Siva who appears as Siva’s partner. The ritual of offering animal sacrifices to Durga, practiced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century might have had ancient roots perhaps evoked in the Banteay Srei representation. Therefore the interaction between Siva and Durga and their connection to the theme of fertility should be considered as an intimate component of this rich canvas.

Cravath suggests that dance in Cambodia has always represented these two forces, the feminine and the masculine, in confrontation with each other and as a ritual, their performance had the power to contact the spirits who could in-

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<sup>33</sup>Although standing in niches that frame entrances, these figures do not appear to fit the imagery of *dwarapala* or door guardians. Guardian images at several other temples have an erect posture, some with grim expressions and often hold some sort of weapon in their hand. Some of the male niche figures at Banteay Srei appear to hold a staff in their hand but their serene deportment and gentility belie any martial characteristic.





Figure 6.24: Female niche figure at Banteay Srei surrounded by vegetal forms.



fluence the result of their interaction. I suggest that the Siva and Durga images at Banteay Srei are an articulation of this particular interaction between the two principles. In this perspective, these two forms can no longer be viewed as separate, unconnected or a result of random choice by the patron of the monument. Instead, they can be seen as a couple whose energetic interaction with each other will ensure the prosperity of the land and people. In the opening lines of one of the inscriptions found at the site and dated to 969 C.E., Siva and Sakti are invoked saying that the devout look upon them as an indistinguishable from each other as fire and heat<sup>34</sup>. Like the images of Vishnu and Lakshmi at Kbal Spean, the relationship between Siva and Durga also include a sexual component but one that is subtle rather than overt. The sexual interaction between the male and female deities in this particular representation requires the viewer to conjoin the deities in their mind in order to activate their intimate relationship. The coalescing of the forms are also facilitated by the architectural elements of the structure; the walls that connect and surround the images channel the flow of energies between the two deities infusing the structure with sacred power. The creative tension between Durga and Siva is maintained by the architectural elements that at once connect and hold apart the images. Like at Prasat Kravan, the monument is not merely a canvas for the projection of images; they are an intrinsic part of the image itself and vice versa. The boundaries between image and structure thus become blurred with a reciprocative flow of energy between them<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup>(Finot et al., 2000, p. 73).

<sup>35</sup>The obscuring of boundaries might also extend to other aspects of performance in Cambodia for instance between the narrators, or players as Phim and Thompson term them, and the figures of the shadow puppets. The narrators move their bodies along with the puppets almost as their extensions. In this way, the players become like the characters of the puppets themselves while the puppets are animated by the energy of the players. Like the figures and

This notion of permeable boundaries has already been propounded by Mus when he discusses a very similar concept that he calls “bi-presence” in his essay on the local cults of Champa (and Southeast Asia in general). Spirits of the locality exist in objects like stones<sup>36</sup> in their concentrated essence which at times will pass into the form of an officiant/priest. When this happens, the stone does not cease to be the god, rather the god is both stone and officiant at the same time. Mus (1975, pp.13-14) clarifies “There is no contradiction in this, because it is formless and permanent being that the god-stone in the stone retains, while it is a personality of a different order, projected upon another plane, corporeal and impermanent...”. One could therefore suggest that the distinct boundaries between object and concept become blurred, as entities link and “flow” into one another, dismantling totalities of identity and form. Similarly, in his analysis of Cham ancestor cults, Mus (1975, pp. 17–18) points out that stone tablets named *kut* are believed to embody the amorphous spirits of the soil, thus fusing the material and immaterial together; they are two manifestations arbitrarily brought together. The stone becomes god and god is part of the stone. Mus gives examples of *kut* that sometimes is just a stone stela that does not resemble a human to others but are accorded human characteristics such as a helmet, belt (for male) and coiffure (female). In the case of the human-like stela, the edges curve inwards like hips (Mus, 1975, pp. 40–41). Likewise, in present day Klungkung, Bali, spirits were believed to dwell in gongs that would sound when danger objects in the *sbaek thom* leather puppet panels, one might also perceive of the images of Siva and Durga as being connected through the walls of the temple linked by their corresponding energies. In the descriptions given by Phim and Thompson of the puppet theater performance, all the elements, the puppets, players, music, narration and audience seemed to linked to each other by the cadence of the performance. For details see Phim and Thompson (1999, pp. 28–32).

<sup>36</sup>Mus (1975, p. 14) stresses that here, the stone is not a lodging of the god but is the god himself, a stone-genie.

was near (p. 45 Wiener, 1995, p. 48). As Wiener (1995, p. 50) explains, every Balinese is aware of two worlds, the palpable reality (*sekala*) perceived through the senses, as well as the invisible and numinous (*niskala*) and “[t]here is little of human importance that does not partake of the *niskala*”. Therefore the permeability of boundaries between objects, concepts and energies in Angkorean Cambodia was likely part of a larger network of beliefs that encompassed other Southeast Asian cultures. The Durga image at Banteay Srei, both individually and through her association with other images, with Siva and the monument is a vital link in our understanding of not only Khmer religion and culture but also perhaps some aspects of this larger network.

Was the critical presence and role of Durga reflective of the status of women during the Angkor period? Jacobsen has cited the lack of individually-represented Durga images after the 9<sup>th</sup> century as indicative of the lowered status of women in Angkor society. It has been pointed out earlier that individual images of goddesses continued to be made, featured on both temple reliefs and as free-standing images although the number of Durga images are lesser than in the pre-Angkor period. According to Jacobsen (2008, p. 20), the popularity of separate images of the martial goddess like the Durga images of the Pre-Angkorean period is “more tangible evidence to support the notion of a wide-spread acceptance of female authority in preclassical Cambodia” although when it came to holding political office, women were the exception rather than the rule. As seen earlier, it is possible that Durga could have been a composite deity, integrating a local ancestral deity with her Indian identity. According to the inscriptional reference, this local deity was a deceased queen, thereby underscoring the significance that matrilineal descent was accorded at the time. According to Jacobsen (2008, pp. 58–59) the *kamraten kanlong an* might have rep-

resented a 'lunar race' consisting of royal women, many of whom have now been identified, and therefore "they did constitute a significant ideological force for the ruling elite families between the ninth and twelfth centuries". Remarriage was common and some queen married multiple times. Marriages with royal women gave kings and aspirants to the throne access to land, thereby augmenting their claim to legitimacy and increase of political might. Inscriptions, such as the one at Pre Rup contain powerful imagery of goddesses while both gods and goddesses were invoked for their blessing. The Mahalakshmi image at Prasat Kravan, the Lakshmi images at Kbal Spean and the myth recounted by Chou Ta-Kuan suggest that the feminine principle continued to be considered significant and influential. At the same time, Jacobsen (2008, p. 45) also points out that qualities such as the observance of duty, fidelity and chastity were enlisted in inscriptions as the desired qualities in women. Chou Ta-Kuan's account mentions that sexual autonomy was practiced at least by women who were not born into the royal family<sup>37</sup> and therefore virginity did not seem to be a prerequisite for marriage although inscriptions praise women who were not "deflowered". In sum, information on the status of women is varied. But the continued appearance of individual deities even after the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the veneration of female ancestral spirits suggests that the status and significance of women/divine feminine during the Angkor period was notable.

## 6.11 Conclusion

Goddess Durga occupies a prominent status in the pantheon of gods in ancient Cambodia. Popular since the pre-Angkorean period and into the Angko-

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<sup>37</sup>(Jacobsen, 2008, p. 67).

rean era, this mighty goddess appears to have been a synthesis of an Indian divinity (or divinities) and a local spirit, although it is not certain how far back in time this coalescence transpired. A sole reference in an inscription suggests that it may have dated at least to the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Her individual images are suggestive of her status as an independent deity. Her status in other Southeast Asian regions notwithstanding, Durga in Cambodia emerges as a powerful and potent force, associated with fertility, human and animal sacrifices. Thus she poses a direct challenge to Bhattacharya's<sup>38</sup> claim that in Cambodia, Siva's *sakti* was always considered inferior.

The monument of Banteay Srei provides a unique canvas that eloquently articulates the potency of Durga in relation to Siva as well as other images. The relevance of the Siva and Durga forms are highlighted through the actions that they perform, namely a performative interaction that engenders the fertility and prosperity of the kingdom. The walls of the monument both connect and separate the two images. As interactive entities in this context, there is no fixed hierarchy between them: positions are set up only to be re-arranged. Positioned above doorways, Siva and Durga also incorporate the devotee into its representation which transforms the latter into the deity at the same time maintaining his/her identity as a devotee. The permeability of boundaries between these various elements - image, monument, location and devotee - links them not only to each other but to the larger network that constitutes the religious, historical and cultural practices of the period. The presence of the divine feminine in this extended network emerges as a substantial and critical force.

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<sup>38</sup>Bhattacharya (1961, p. 90).

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

The ravages of time and war have left their indelible marks on the Angkor monuments. Crumbling roofs, disintegrating images, fading stucco and bullet holes have stripped the grand monuments of their vibrancy and splendor. Nevertheless, these monuments in their somewhat diminished glory still entice thousands of visitors to their presence every single year. Standing in the courtyards, these visitors stare in wonderment at their beauty. Some run their hands over the alluring images, others take in the soft rays of the morning sun on the summits of monuments or watch in silence as the monsoon rains wash over the images and descend as a thick, fragrant curtain from the rooftops onto the ground far below. Some peer at the Vishnu and Lakshmi sculptures at Kbal Spean, trying to discern the distinct images even as the churning waters blur them. Stepping into the womb of the Prasat Kravan temple, I felt the imminent presence of the larger-than-life goddesses surround me. For a moment I imagined these divinities illuminated by the dim light of oil lamps, creating the impression of images emerging from the walls. These monuments and images embody the immanent potential of a haptic experience to the discerning visitors.

The need to reduce these monuments to blueprints, measurements and diagrams as also the efforts to restore and reconstruct them by the colonial scholars can be viewed as statements to control and “rationalize” the sensation of being overwhelmed by something that was in many ways incomprehensible to them. The various constitutive elements of these cultural vestiges were dismantled and re-fitted into a hierarchical structure that was dictated by the authors’ philosophical predilections. While acknowledging their vast contributions to

the field of Khmer history in general, it should also be noted that their intellectual biases unfortunately resulted in the neglect of certain aspects in their study, namely the status and role of the feminine and the importance of landscape in understanding Khmer art.

Inscriptional references, myths, images and modern performance traditions which are the building blocks for writing Khmer history, all contain numerous references that strongly suggest that at various times, the feminine was of vital importance in Khmer politics and culture. She represented the earth and territorial might and therefore of critical significance to kingship. In order to keep himself alive and his kingdom prosperous, the king was required to copulate with the spirit of the earth, in the form of a *naga* princess. Gender divisions and hierarchies may have been much more fluid and permeable, a notion that is expressed in modern performance traditions of Cambodia that may have had ancient roots. Select Indian ideas, imagery and traditions were chosen to highlight these apparent autochthonous beliefs that ingeniously wove together image, monument and landscape in a dynamic and indissoluble bond.

Tantric traditions from India contained venues to elucidate some of these local beliefs. The imposing image of Maha/Sri/Lakshmi, a Tantric deity, was portrayed at Prasat Kravan, sculpted directly onto the inner walls of the shrine. By creating the impression that she was emerging from the earth itself this portrayal drew attention to her connection to and as the earth itself, an aspect that is widely alluded to in inscriptions as well. As *sakti*, she was both thought and action, and her depiction in a separate monument underscored her independent status as a deity, and as Mahalakshmi would be the source of power for her male consort Vishnu.

In inscriptions, Khmer kings were often compared to Vishnu, who according to Hindu mythology, embodied the qualities of an ideal king. The Tantric practice of exchanging sexual fluids between a male and female was strikingly similar to the central idea of the myth describing the union between the Khmer king and the *naga* princess. Using the representation of the reclining Vishnu on a *naga* with Lakshmi placing her hand lovingly on his leg, the myth recorded by Chou Ta-Kuan gains an expressive form. The masculine and feminine forms came together at Kbal Spean through the interactive force of the river with the images carved onto the river bed. Infused with these sacred fluids, the river flowed down from the mountains (believed to be the home of ancestors) down into the valley. Coursing through the elaborate irrigation system designed by the kings, these waters fed the rice fields and filled the lakes and ponds that dotted the kingdom. Therefore landscape becomes an integral aspect of understanding religious imagery in Cambodia. For the adept, nature performs the Tantric act itself; the interaction between image and landscape suggests a transformative experience for the body. Kbal Spean is a site not intended merely to engage with visually but with the entirety of one's being. If there was indeed an identification of the *naga* princess with Lakshmi, then the status of the feminine in this particular depiction was not submissive but critical and powerful. These images suggest new venues for understanding power and sensuality in Khmer art.

At Banteay Srei, the dance-like postures of Durga and Siva and their location relative to each other convey the impression of these deities as a pair of dancers poised to move in synchrony to each other. However, it is not a state of equilibrium but rather one that implies a fluctuation between movement and stasis. In modern day Cambodia, the purpose of dance is effect the sexual harmony



of the male and the female. If we were to tentatively employ this argument to understand the Banteay Srei images, then what we have is a representation suggestive of perpetual movement, images engaged in an eternal dance that signify a prolonged state of harmony. The walls of the monument acts as the mechanism that both maintains the sexual tension between the two at the same time enabling them to connect to each other. Far from being a passive representation, the feminine is shown as the active component (again implying Tantric notions) while the masculine is depicted as the more inert principle. A performative interpretation thus suggests an overturning of divisive gender hierarchies that earlier scholarship had constructed with regard to the status of the masculine and feminine in Khmer art.

Is the status of the divine feminine in Khmer art and religion passive or powerful? I started out my study with this overarching question. Despite evidence to suggest the dominance of masculinity in politics, art and religion, the goddess images, inscriptions and myths that formed part of my research indicate a compelling presence of the divine feminine in Khmer culture and politics. Oliver Wolters (1999, p. 233) in his revised edition of *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* revisited the relevance of gender studies in Southeast Asia. He observed that "...gender studies can provide additional arrows in the historian's quiver. But the question for the historian - male and female alike - must be whether...light is shed on anything interesting". To this question, it is only fitting that the great goddess Durga, armed with all the weapons of the gods including arrows, provide a response which she does resoundingly at Banteay Srei. Empowered with the arrows that now strengthen the quiver, we can entice the goddess to emerge from hiding.

APPENDIX A

SUPPLEMENTARY IMAGES



Figure A.1: Virasayana type of Anantasayin depicting the consorts Sri and Bhu at the feet of the god, Mysore (South India) (Rajan, 1967).



Figure A.2: Yogasayana type of Anantasayin with the consort kneeling below Vishnu, Mahabalipuram (South India) (Rajan, 1967).

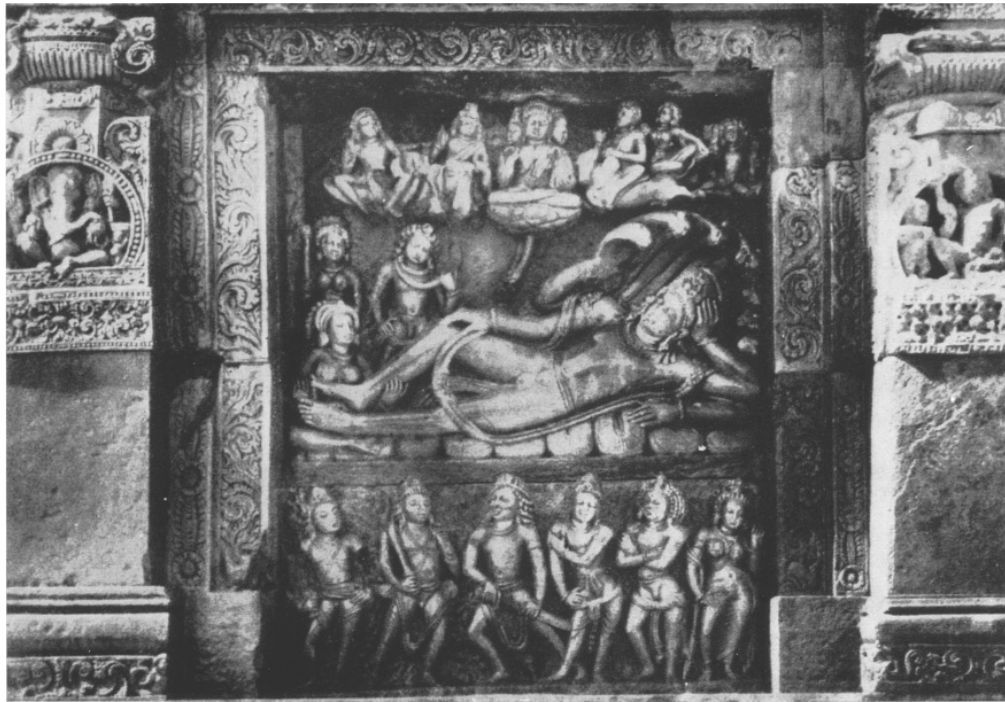


Figure A.3: Sesasayi Panel depicting Vishnu resting on his left arm, at Deogarh, Madhya Pradesh (Central India) (Rajan, 1967).



Figure A.4: Sesasayi Panel depicting Vishnu reclining on his back, at Udayagiri, Madhya Pradesh (Central India) (Rajan, 1967).



Figure A.5: Anantasayin (unfinished), at Tondur, Vinnamparai (South India) (Rajan, 1967).



Figure A.6: Reclining Vishnu and Lakshmi on a dragon with feet, Preah Khan, Cambodia.





Figure A.7: Durga Mahishasuramardini from Nagar, 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E. to 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., India (Agrawala, 1958).



Figure A.8: Durga image at the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, South India.





Figure A.9: Durga at Konerirajapuram temple *ca* 10<sup>th</sup> century, South India. The man kneeling to the left of the image could be holding a sword in his hand, suggesting that he could be a sacrificial victim.





Figure A.10: Durga at Pullamangai *ca* early 10<sup>th</sup> century, South India. The man kneeling to the left is depicted as he is about to decapitate himself.



Figure A.11: Durga image at Bakhong, late 9<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia (Bhattacharya, 1961).



Figure A.12: Image of Durga at Banteay Samre, first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Bhattacharya, 1961).





Figure A.13: Representation of head-offering to a goddess that is possibly Durga, Mahabalipuram (South India) (Vogel, 1931).



Figure A.14: Head-offering to Durga, Trichirapalli rock-cut cave (South India) (Vogel, 1931).



Figure A.15: Head offering to Durga at the “Draupadi” Ratha, Mahabalipuram (South India).

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